



Brussels, 13.5.2025
SWD(2025) 116 final

COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT

Accompanying the document

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

on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies

{COM(2025) 196 final}

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Introduction

This document supports the 5th report to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, on the implementation of the four EU macro-regional strategies: the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region, the EU Strategy for the Danube region, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region and the EU Strategy for the Alpine region. The report covers the period from mid-2022 to mid-2024.

It aims at providing more detailed information concerning the state of implementation of each macro-regional strategy and future expectations. The document is based inter alia on contributions from macro-regional strategy national and thematic coordinators (key implementers) and experts.

The four strategies were created at different times and are therefore at different stages of maturity. This explains the differing availability of data and deliverables.

More information on the strategies can be found on their websites:

<https://eusbsr.eu/>

<http://www.danube-region.eu/>

<http://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/>

<https://www.alpine-region.eu/>

European Union macro-regional strategies

The size and diversity of the European territory means differentiated approaches to its development through specific strategies for functional macro-regions can be a logical and beneficial approach. Increasing interdependence between countries, the growing role of sub-national authorities, and borderless, territorially relevant challenges such as climate change, ecological degradation, natural and man-made hazards, all call for cooperative frameworks whereby groups of countries belonging to a wider geographical space can work together to address common challenges and opportunities.

With a view to providing an effective and collective response to issues better handled by working together, a macro-regional approach arose in the Baltic Sea region with discussions launched in the European Parliament in 2006. This gained momentum over time, with the result that there are now four European Union macro-regional strategies:

- EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region (“Baltic Sea Strategy”)
- EU Strategy for the Danube region (“Danube Strategy”)
- EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region (“Adriatic-Ionian Strategy”)
- EU Strategy for the Alpine region (“Alpine Strategy”)

Each macro-regional strategy is accompanied by an action plan that should be regularly updated in light of new, emerging needs and changing contexts.

The four macro-regional strategies cover 19 EU Member States and 10 non-EU countries. Some Member States (such as Germany and Slovenia) are involved in three strategies, others (such as Croatia, Italy and Austria) are in two strategies.

Macro-regional strategies are strategic frameworks that bring countries and regions together to solve shared challenges that know no borders. The strategies offer a space for long-term collaboration, streamlining and directing all available resources and making long-lasting change. To achieve this, the strategies address challenges from a cross-sectoral perspective, engage relevant stakeholders, initiate, coordinate and support the implementation of specific actions (including projects) and thus align relevant resources, e.g. financial, institutional, human, and legislative to transnational work.

Macro-regional strategies are an important innovation in territorial cooperation and cohesion. However, they differ in several aspects from cross-border and transnational territorial cooperation. One key feature of macro-regional cooperation, similarly to sea-basin strategies, is its anchoring to integrated, strategic, longer-term and open-ended frameworks.

The strategies are initiated and requested by the relevant EU Member States at the level of the European Council. The strategies cover several policy/thematic areas that have been jointly agreed by the participating countries and which reflect their strong political commitment towards joint achievement of common objectives. Following the European Council request, the macro-regional strategies (Communication and accompanying action plan) are prepared by the European Commission in partnership with the participating countries. Therefore, their implementation relies heavily on the commitment and ambition of the participating countries that lead the process. The process is as important as the result: it must be inclusive and bottom up to ensure ownership.

Report on the implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy

Introduction

The Baltic Sea Strategy brings together eight EU Member States around the Baltic Sea, i.e. Finland, Denmark, Estonia Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. The Strategy focuses on three main objectives: Saving the sea, Connecting the region, and Increasing prosperity, which are further supported by sub-objectives that address various common, interconnected challenges such as climate change adaptation, maritime safety, energy, transport, connectivity, competitiveness, and civil protection.

Long-term evolution

Since its inception in 2009, the Strategy has been regularly updated to align with regional and EU policies and priorities, while also adapting to global trends and emerging needs. These updates have ensured that the Strategy's action plan remains relevant and responsive to evolving priorities, challenges, and opportunities.

Over the past two years, the Strategy has undergone substantial changes driven by both internal and external factors. Firstly, and key among these, was the implementation of the revised action plan introduced in February 2021, which further aligned the Strategy with the EU's green and digital transition objectives, reduced the number of actions in the action plan from 73 to 44, and creating a more streamlined structure with 14 policy areas. Furthermore, the establishment of the Baltic Sea Strategy Point as a support structure addressed an important gap by providing dedicated coordination and support, which was previously largely lacking compared to other macro-regional strategies.

Progress in implementing the action plan has been notable, particularly with the operationalisation of the Strategy Point in October 2022. The Strategy Point – guided by the National Coordinators' Group – has since played a vital role in facilitating stakeholder collaboration by providing administrative and technical support, including training, capacity-building, and knowledge sharing. This support has been important during the reporting period, as policy areas adjusted to the revised action plan, managed the challenges posed by COVID-19 and international developments, while incorporating new policy area coordinators and steering group members.

Moreover, there was a noticeable change in the dynamics of international collaboration in the Baltic Sea region due to the suspension of all cooperation with Russia and Belarus following Russia's military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. This alteration has negatively affected the Strategy's ability to tackle shared challenges that usually require collaboration among all countries bordering the Baltic Sea, such as pollution, climate change mitigation, biodiversity loss, and maritime operations and risk management.

In response to this challenge, Strategy stakeholders increased their collaborative efforts across different levels and policy areas, placing a particular emphasis on working, outside the Baltic Sea region, with Ukraine. Consequently, enhancing resilience, recovery, and preparedness in partnership with Ukraine has become an additional focus for the Strategy, outside its core geographic area.

Overall, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened ties among the Member States surrounding the Baltic Sea, promoting deeper and more dynamic collaboration while heightening interest in the Strategy and other platforms for pan-Baltic Sea cooperation.

Preparations to undertake another update of the Strategy action plan were launched in the autumn of 2023, with the goal of having a newly updated plan in place by early 2026.

Delivering on the green, digital, and fair transitions

The Strategy advances the **green transition** and **environmental sustainability** through a range of initiatives and projects focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and pollution, promoting sustainable agriculture, improving wastewater treatment, enhancing biodiversity conservation, and fostering the circular economy. Significant progress has been made in climate action, with increased efforts to integrate climate considerations across all 14 policy areas. More policy areas are now reporting climate-related activities and adopting cross-sectoral approaches to address these challenges.

For example, the **Collaborative BSR Decarbonisation** working group brings together cities around the Baltic Sea participating in the EU Mission for Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities to promote and facilitate joint climate actions as well as to endorse cross-macro-regional cooperation. The related activities range from equipping municipalities with tools to withstand climate change impacts to promoting circular lifestyles and advancing offshore wind energy production. (*Policy Areas Innovation, and Nutri*).

The **CiNURGi** project promotes circular economy by recycling biomass from agricultural, municipal, and industrial sources into safe fertilizers, with the goal of enhancing nutrient recovery infrastructure and technology for efficient nutrient use (*Policy Areas Nutri, and Bioeconomy; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*). In the **Creative Circular Cities** project, local authorities, business support organisations and non-governmental organisations showcase in six demonstration cities how cultural and creative sectors and industries can trigger circular business growth and promote circular consumption among people (*Policy Area Culture; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

The **EMERGE** (Evaluation, control and Mitigation of the EnviRonmental impacts of shippinG Emissions) project made significant progress in 2023, publishing high-level [research papers](#) that evaluated emission reduction solutions and strategies to mitigate the environmental impacts of European shipping (*Policy Area Ship, Horizon 2020*). The **OpenRisk II** project develops practical, user-centred risk management for maritime authorities and organisations to enhance maritime accident prevention, thereby helping to minimise accidents and their footprint on the marine environment. (*Policy Areas Safe, and Ship; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

The **BALTIPLAST** project fosters collaboration and innovation to identify, test, and deploy effective solutions to mitigate plastic waste entering the sea (*Policy Area Innovation; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*). The **EMPEREST** project strengthens sustainable water management by providing tools, recommendations, and training to local authorities and wastewater operators for addressing PFAS and other micropollutants, enhancing regional monitoring and supporting cost-effective treatment technologies. (*Policy Area Hazards; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

Similarly, the Strategy acknowledges the crucial role of **digitalisation** in stimulating economic growth and innovation. It supports the advancement of digital infrastructure, skills, and services

to improve connectivity, competitiveness, and efficiency, advocating for digitalisation across sectors such as education, maritime transport, and governance and business operations.

The ongoing [Real-Time Economy](#) initiative, launched in 2018, serves as a prime example of fostering sustainable effects of digitalisation. It aims to drive digital transformation in the region by reducing administrative burdens and accelerating economic activities through real-time data exchange. A 2023 report emphasised the need to harmonise real-time practices and develop interoperable systems to boost productivity and regional competitiveness (*Policy Area Innovation; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

The [DistanceLAB](#) project develops tools to enhance organisational resilience and adaptability, focusing on "distance soft skills" for effective remote work management in the post-COVID era. (*Policy Area Innovation, Interreg Baltic Sea Region*). Similarly, the [Baltic Sea e-Nav](#) project is advancing the next generation of navigational products and services aligned with new international standards, empowering maritime authorities and organisations to achieve safer, more harmonised, and eco-efficient navigation (*Policy Area Safe; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*). The Strategy has also promoted and contributed to cross-macroregional projects like [SMART ERA](#), which promotes digital solutions tailored to the needs of rural areas that fosters digital solutions for rural areas (*Policy Areas Innovation, and Tourism; Horizon Europe*).

The AMBeR ([Advanced Modeling of Baltic Cancer e-caRe](#)) project aims to enhance cancer care in the South Baltic region by developing e-health solutions that facilitate home-based treatment monitoring and rehabilitation for patients. By conducting pilot programmes across multiple sites, it seeks to create a model of e-care that reduces hospital visits, improves patient quality of life, and addresses healthcare disparities, particularly in rural areas. (*Policy Area Innovation; Interreg South Baltic*).

The strategy promotes a **fair** transition based on social inclusion, cohesion and well-being by supporting initiatives that address e.g. social challenges or enhance education and training opportunities. It supports innovation-driven projects that improve skills and stimulate entrepreneurship, job creation and sustainable solutions.

For instance, in the [RESIST](#) (Regional Ecosystems for Social Innovation and Social Transformation) project, regional authorities, business support organisations, and sectoral agencies are collaborating to develop a model for opening up existing regional innovation ecosystems to social innovators and entrepreneurs (*Policy Area Innovation; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*). [We make transition!](#) is a collaborative project between public authorities and civil society in 12 cities in six countries to promote social and ecological initiatives in such areas as consumption, mobility, energy, and social life, e.g. by facilitating the co-creation of sustainable solutions (*Policy Area Innovation; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

The projects [BSR Cultural Pearls](#), [BALTIC UKH](#) and [BaMuR](#), strengthen the role of cities and regions in actively involving citizens and fostering a sense of belonging and trust. For example, BaMuR equips public authorities, non-governmental organisations and small- and medium-sized enterprises with a toolbox to help cultural and heritage institutions maintain their consolation role to people in times of crisis (*Policy Areas Culture, Spatial Planning, and Tourism; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*). The [BSG-Go!](#) develops methods to enhance the resilience in the game industry, so that the created tactics can be also adapted to other cultural and creative industries, creating a safety net in the case of future crises (*Policy Area Culture; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

Overall, within the strategy, projects and initiatives related to green and digital transitions and social inclusion are often closely interconnected. By addressing these areas collectively, they create synergies that reinforce each other, working in tandem to promote sustainable development across the Baltic Sea region. This comprehensive approach weaves together environmental objectives, technological innovation, and social equity, fostering a balanced framework that supports the region's overall development.

Supporting EU enlargement

Although there are no EU candidate countries in the Baltic Sea region, the Strategy has established strong cooperation with Ukraine since 2022. This collaboration aims to strengthen Ukraine's resilience, support its recovery, and assist in its long-term goal of EU membership. This cooperation and support for Ukraine complements the active role that Ukraine plays as a full member of the Danube Strategy.

The cooperation between the Baltic Sea region and Ukraine fosters international cooperation and solidarity through initiatives focused on capacity building, aligning Ukraine's policies with EU standards, and creating opportunities for institutional reforms to facilitate future EU integration. It also offers direct humanitarian and economic assistance to address the immediate challenges posed by the Russian aggression. A key aspect of this collaboration is strengthening ties between Ukrainian and Baltic Sea cities, regions, and stakeholders.

In addition, Baltic Sea stakeholders support Ukrainian organisations in participating in Interreg projects as associated partners, enabling joint learning and leveraging expertise to address Ukraine's urgent needs. By promoting multi-level partnerships and integrating Ukraine into the broader European cooperation framework, the strategy not only aids Ukraine's recovery but also enhances the resilience and cohesion of the Baltic Sea region as a whole.

Responding to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

In March 2022, following Russia's unjustified war against Ukraine, the Strategy suspended all cooperation with Russia and Belarus in March 2022. In response to the heightened geopolitical and regional tensions, the Strategy started providing support to Ukraine. This aligns with the broader political priorities in the region, which have included helping Ukraine, particularly through humanitarian and economic assistance, as well as initiatives like the EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes to create essential transport corridors.

Initially, in the second half of 2022, workshops and events were organised with Ukrainian representatives to explore potential areas of cooperation with the Strategy. These discussions focused on policy areas such as Education, Secure, Innovation, Nutri, Hazards, Ship, and Bioeconomy, aiming to provide effective support to Ukraine and to establish structures for collaboration in the recovery phase. The Strategy's first cooperation initiatives with Ukrainian stakeholders were launched in December 2022.

For example, the [BSI 4Women](#) project empowers refugee women through entrepreneurship, tackling war-related socio-economic challenges and fostering integration. By providing tailored support, training, and networking, it promotes economic independence, resilience, and inclusive growth in refugee and host communities (*Policy Area Innovation, Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

The [Civil Protection Faculty](#) unites Baltic Sea experts to train Ukrainian educators in emergency medicine, mine safety, resilience, and democratic engagement. By spring 2024, over 40,000 Ukrainians, including civilians and first responders, had received training at Ukraine's first folk high school (*Policy Areas Education, and Secure, Swedish Institute*).

Collaboration with Ukraine is noteworthy in areas such as wastewater treatment, nutrient management, hazardous substances, and the bioeconomy, given its connection to the Baltic Sea via the Vistula River. Policy areas, including Nutri, Hazards, Ship, and Bioeconomy, are partnering with Ukrainian counterparts to address these issues. In October 2023, they organised a conference that outlined plans for sustainable reconstruction, emphasising environmental damage monitoring and supporting Ukraine's transition toward environmental and social sustainability. Ukraine also participates as an observer in Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission meetings and works with national water associations through the [Clean Baltic Source](#) initiative to tackle urgent water management challenges in the Vistula River basin (*Policy Area Nutri; Swedish Institute*).

Promoting cohesion and place-based development

The Strategy aligns closely with key EU cohesion policy goals, specifically focusing on promoting balanced economic, social, and territorial development across the Baltic Sea region. Through the mobilisation of EU and other funding sources and the coordination of investments, it fosters economic growth and social inclusion in the region. By doing so, it seeks to reduce regional disparities, ensuring that no area is left behind in terms of growth and development.

Improving territorial integration involves creating better connections and interactions between different areas within the Baltic Sea region, fostering a more cohesive and interconnected territory. By improving communication and transportation links, the strategy helps to facilitate easier movement of people, goods, and services, thereby boosting economic activity and cooperation.

Central to the Strategy is the encouragement of partnerships and cooperation among a diverse range of stakeholders. Local and regional authorities are brought together with civil society organisations, businesses, and academic institutions to work collaboratively towards common goals. This multi-level governance model ensures that different perspectives and expertise are integrated into the planning and implementation processes, leading to more effective and comprehensive solutions.

For example, the [SMART ERA](#) project mentioned above aims to combat rural depopulation by enhancing adaptability for the twin transition through a community-driven approach addressing demographics, digitalisation, participation, and inclusive transition (*PA Innovation, and Tourism; Horizon Europe*). The [BSR Cultural Pearls](#), [BaMuR](#), [BALTIC UKH](#) projects, which are also described above, strengthen the role of cities and regions in actively involving citizens and fostering a sense of belonging and trust (*Policy Areas Culture, Innovation, Spatial Planning, and Tourism; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

Thus, the Strategy not only supports EU cohesion policy objectives but also ensures that these objectives are tailored to the specific needs and priorities of the region. By addressing local challenges and leveraging regional strengths, it contributes to a more harmonious and prosperous region, ultimately improving the quality of life.

The partnership – involving civil society, local communities and young people

The 2021 action plan enhanced the structured participation of non-governmental organisations, civil society, youth organisations, and businesses in the Strategy. Civil society organisations and local stakeholders are represented in policy area steering groups, national coordination groups, thematic panels, events, and expert fora. The Strategy relies largely on local stakeholders and civil society for project implementation, recognising the value of local knowledge, expertise, and ownership.

For instance, the above-mentioned ['We Make Transition!'](#) initiative focuses on fostering collaboration between public authorities and civil society organisations across 12 cities in six countries to promote social and ecological advancements (*PA Innovation; Interreg Baltic Sea Region*).

Youth engagement is promoted through various formats, notably the Baltic Sea Youth Forum, which empowers young people and amplifies their perspectives. The Council of the Baltic Sea States coordinates youth representation across policy areas, providing resources to build capacities among relevant stakeholders. Alongside the policy area “Culture”, it supports Youth Camps and other youth-centric events to foster participation.

An example of a youth initiative is the creation of **Youth Guidance Centres** to support vulnerable young adults aged 20 to 30. This model, developed with input from experts across all eight Member States of the Strategy, and inspired by successful practices in Denmark, Finland, and Germany, is now being implemented in Lithuania and Poland.

In August 2022, the Baltic Sea Youth Camp in Lappeenranta, Finland, led to the [Baltic Sea Youth Declaration 2022](#), unveiled at the Annual Forum in the same city. Developed with input from 200 participants and the Baltic Sea Youth Platform's Advocacy Working Group, the declaration offers policy recommendations across 14 areas, emphasising youth involvement in the Strategy.

The 2023 Annual Forum in Riga also prioritised youth engagement, featuring workshops on youth and culture in community development and fostering cooperation with Ukraine for sustainable rebuilding. Discussions with experts and youth representatives highlighted the importance of involving Ukrainian youth in the strategy's activities and networks, generating concrete ideas for further collaboration.

Improving governance and administrative capacity

During the reporting period, the Strategy was chaired by Sweden from July 2022 to June 2023, and by Latvia from July 2023 to June 2024. The National Coordinators' Group, comprising representatives from the eight Member States, met about eight times a year. As a result, the Trio Presidency arrangement (involving the past, current, and future presidencies) was not frequently required. In line with the revised 2021 action plan, the policy areas and their steering groups underwent a reorganisation, which included adopting new rules of procedure and integrating numerous new coordinators and steering group members.

The establishment and activation of the Baltic Strategy Point in October 2022 marked a key step in enhancing the governance and administrative capacity of the strategy. The Strategy Point replaced the "Lets Communicate!" project, which primarily focused on internal and external

communication activities. Instead, the Strategy Point now supports the work of all key stakeholders by assisting in the management and development of the strategy. It operates under the guidance and accountability of the National Coordinators' Group, which determines its terms of reference and tasks, while the Strategy Point works closely with the presidency on a day-to-day basis.

The Strategy Point team, consisting of seven members, is hosted jointly by the Centrum Balticum Foundation in Turku, Finland, and the Senate Chancellery of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, Germany. Its responsibilities include coordinating overall communication, monitoring and evaluating activities, serving as the institutional memory of the strategy, and providing technical support to the National Coordinators' Group and policy area coordinators. Additionally, the Strategy Point supports the planning and organisation of the annual fora, coordinates capacity-building efforts, and facilitates knowledge sharing and the exchange of best practices, particularly in areas such as climate change and cooperation with non-EU neighbouring countries.

A key challenge identified by stakeholders is maintaining stability and continuity within policy area governance. Frequent changes in the steering group composition and varying levels of expertise can impact the smoothness of cooperation and effectiveness of implementation. A few steering groups experience difficulties to attract members from all partner countries, and the lack of dedicated funding and resources creates uncertainty, making it difficult to secure participation and sustain long-term engagement. Additionally, the vast majority of the 14 policy area coordinators for the Strategy manage this role alongside their primary responsibilities within national administrations.

Adding to these governance challenges, the Baltic Sea Strategy stands out among other EU macro-regional strategies - as well as the intergovernmental pan-Baltic Sea organisations – due to the absence of regular ministerial-level meetings. This lack of a political forum presents a distinct challenge for the Strategy in gaining high-level political commitment and addressing emerging challenges. It also contrasts strongly with the high-level political involvement that existed at the time of the creation of the Strategy.

In conclusion, while the administrative capacity and governance structures within the Strategy have evolved to enhance coordination and decision-making, challenges remain in maintaining political interest and ensuring full stakeholder involvement that is linked to the issue of securing sufficient resources for the policy areas to implement the Strategy.

Access to funding and embedding

Under the 2021-2027 cohesion policy regulatory framework, where a transnational programme under Interreg supports a macro-regional strategy, at least 80% of the EU funding in the programme must contribute to the objectives of the strategy concerned.

As a result of this legal requirement, the Interreg Baltic Sea programme remains closely linked to the Strategy in terms of geography, themes and governance support, being the primary funding source across the bulk of the policy areas. The closer integration and coordination between the Strategy and the programme stemming from the legislation is significantly facilitating project development and co-financing.

Furthermore, the cross-border cooperation programmes active in the region, e.g. Interreg South Baltic, Central Baltic, Aurora, and Öresund-Kattegat-Skagerrak, are funding projects in certain policy areas such as Innovation, Ship, and Education. The stakeholders see that these programmes possess untapped potential to finance projects in a variety of domains such as the circular economy and sustainable development.

While cooperation programmes are often the first port of call for funding resources for strategy projects, because of their multi-country nature, strategies are not, and cannot be, restricted to looking to such programmes for funding. Noteworthy other potential funding mechanisms include national and regional cohesion policy programmes in the participating Member States (covering funding from the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund+, and the Just Transition Fund). Investments under the strategic plans of the Common Agricultural Policy also provide funding, notably in the fields of water management, renewable energy and energy efficiency. EU programmes managed directly by the European Commission, such as Horizon Europe, the LIFE Programme, Erasmus, and the Connecting Europe Facility can also fund projects in policy areas such as Innovation, Nutri, Ship, and Transport.

During the reporting period, the Strategy Point took on a key role in keeping stakeholders informed about funding opportunities and offering tools and training to support access to these resources. Despite this, funding for most policy areas is not yet diversified, still relying largely on the Interreg Baltic Sea programme.

Furthermore, not all policy areas are eligible for Interreg funding, creating challenges in identifying alternative financial resources. This leads to significant variations in the number of projects each policy area can implement. In general, the effectiveness of individual policy areas often hinges on the networks, objectives, and involvement of the policy area coordinator's host organisation within the broader framework of Baltic Sea cooperation.

Measuring impact through monitoring and evaluation

The 2021 action plan outlines the monitoring and evaluation framework for the Strategy. In essence, the National Coordinators' Group endorses this framework and ensures its publication on the Strategy's website. Policy area coordinators monitor their policy areas and actions, preparing annual reports for their respective steering groups, which evaluate and endorse the reports, then submit them to the National Coordinators' Group for information. The National Coordinators' Group reviews the reports and shares them with the Commission. National coordinators conduct monitoring through coordination structures between relevant ministries, and managing authorities report on their programmes' contributions to the Strategy's implementation.

The main monitoring and evaluation tools also include monthly meetings and ongoing information exchange facilitated by policy area coordinators regarding completed and planned projects and activities. National Coordinators' Group meetings furthermore involve discussions on emerging activities, progress made, targets, indicators, and plans for future actions.

By the end of the reporting period, the monitoring and evaluation framework was fully established but not yet fully operational. The ongoing work to update the action plan already incorporates the development of new monitoring indicators for the actions. The groundwork laid over the past few years provides a good foundation for this undertaking.

The Strategy Point, along with support units from other macro-regional strategies, also began participating in a capacity-building initiative (facilitated by the Interreg Interact programme). This initiative aims to enhance the monitoring and evaluation systems across all four strategies.

Communicating the Strategy

The Strategy Point commenced operations in October 2022, representing a significant advancement in communication capabilities and the execution of the overall communication strategy.

The Strategy Point focuses on enhancing both internal and external communication efforts by refining messaging, improving stakeholders' communication competencies, generating high-quality materials, and offering training to policy area coordinators on effectively demonstrating the strategy's added value, for example. It has formulated Communication guidelines with well-defined objectives, along with a 'Visual identity manual' and a series of templates.

According to [Eurobarometer 2023](#), the Baltic Sea Strategy became the most recognised of the macro-regional strategies, with EU-wide citizens' awareness increasing from 13% to 14% between 2021 and 2023. There were also positive trends across all communication channels of the strategy in terms of outreach, number of followers, and engagement. For instance, on LinkedIn, the average monthly impressions increased from 1600 to 3300 between 2022 and 2023. Conversely, on X (former Twitter), average monthly impressions decreased from 11900 to 7300. Website traffic also saw growth, with the average number of monthly sessions increasing from 4500 to 6500 between 2022 and 2023. Similarly, the number of recipients opening the monthly newsletters rose from 600 to 803 between 2022 and 2023, indicating the success of awareness-raising activities.

During the reporting period, two annual fora were organised: the [13th Annual Forum](#) held in Lappeenranta (Finland) in September 2022, gathered 490 participants, and the [14th Annual Forum](#) in Riga (Latvia) held in October 2023, attracted 575 participants. In both cases, the forum participants represented various sectors, i.e. governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, universities, local and regional administrations, businesses, and media.

Moving forward, the emphasis will be on broadening the network of multipliers and defining common communication messages between the strategy and the programmes funding the projects and initiatives.

The way forward

Looking ahead, stakeholders generally see that the Strategy should continue to act as a driving force for advancing green, connected, and inclusive development throughout the Baltic Sea region. The Strategy's core strength lies in its integrated, cross-sectoral, and multi-level approach, which allows for comprehensive and coordinated solutions to complex challenges.

This approach is increasingly critical as the region faces mounting impacts of climate change, including continuing marine ecosystem degradation, marine pollution, technological change, and heightened geopolitical and regional tensions, including threats to maritime and energy security, underscoring the need for enhanced cooperation, resilience, and collective action.

Member countries stress that future efforts should prioritise initiatives that support a just and fair sustainable transition and the future EU agenda and policies. This includes fostering equitable economic, social, and environmental progress to ensure no group or region is left behind. There is a consensus on the importance of strengthening ties with Ukraine, emphasising practical cooperation that contributes to resilience, stability and shared prosperity. Resilience and adaptability are widely regarded as essential for the strategy to remain effective.

Key stakeholders also emphasise the importance of setting realistic objectives and creating the necessary conditions, including financial support, for the policy areas to implement the strategy and achieve results effectively. There are also calls for stronger efforts to ensure comprehensive stakeholder engagement, including greater involvement of civil society and youth organisations, particularly in project activities.

Access to funding remains a persistent challenge, especially in sectors like transport, which limits the scope of activities and projects under the Strategy. Some stakeholders advocate for more efficient and supportive funding mechanisms that are better aligned with the goals of the macro-regional strategies.

A major challenge highlighted by key stakeholders, as in the past, is the lack of sustained political interest and ownership beyond the annual fora. This often results in inadequate resources allocated to the Strategy's implementation within national ministries and organisations. To overcome this, the stakeholders see that it would be important to increase the Strategy's visibility and understanding, particularly in inland regions of member countries, among other actions, in order to build broader support and ensure its effective implementation.

Despite a reduction in financial resources for governance during the current EU cohesion policy programming period compared to the previous one, the Strategy has still managed to achieve impactful results. Nevertheless, especially given the growing interest in Baltic Sea cooperation and the Strategy in recent years, there is an opportunity to achieve even greater outcomes if key implementers are provided with additional resources.

Regarding cross-macro-regional cooperation, stakeholders highlight challenges, including limited resources and funding at regional and local levels. Policy areas generally emphasise the need to strengthen collaboration across sectors, policy areas, and macro-regions, recognising that many challenges are interconnected and require joint solutions.

In practical terms, the Strategy's immediate focus is on updating the current action plan. This involves rethinking and redefining actions, as well as developing new monitoring indicators to align with the actions. The updated action plan is anticipated to be adopted by early 2026, setting the stage for the next phase of EU cohesion policy programming post-2027, with an emphasis on embedding the Strategy effectively into cohesion policy funding.

Report on the implementation of the Danube Strategy

Introduction

Dating from 2010, the Danube Strategy was the second macro-regional strategy to be launched. The Strategy covers 14 countries that differ considerably in terms of socio-economic development. It includes nine EU Member States and five EU candidate countries. No third countries participate in the Strategy.

The Strategy is built around four pillars:

- **Connecting the region** focuses on improving inland navigation along the Danube and promoting culture and tourism.
- **Protecting the environment** seeks to restore and maintain water quality, among other issues.
- **Building prosperity** aims to develop a knowledge-driven society.
- **Strengthening the region** focuses on improving decision-making capacity and structures in the public and private sector.

The four pillars are divided into 12 priority areas.

Long-term evolution

Over the years, the Strategy has brought added value to existing cooperation mechanisms, by offering a unique transnational, macro-regional dimension. It has gained significant importance in contributing to the resilience of the Danube region and has become a tool to offer tailor-made support for EU accession and enlargement.

Ukraine's Presidency in 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Presidency in 2025 and the fact that all countries participating in the Strategy are now either EU Member States or future EU Member States has helped to raise the commitment to macro-regional cooperation in all parts of the Danube region.

The 2024 Austrian Presidency put particular emphasis on research and development, skills and competencies and by enhancing competitiveness and business opportunities including tourism. Austria aimed to capitalise on the recently launched Commission initiatives Partnerships for Regional Innovation and Regional Innovation Valleys. This included assessing the progress in the establishment of the Danube Tech Valley Initiative. Another priority of the Austrian Presidency was to contribute to stability and security and help to provide a clear European perspective for the whole Danube region. This comprised facilitating EU enlargement by aiding Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan countries.

Initiatives are also taken at national level and by individual priority areas to further develop and strengthen the Strategy. In Germany, the 93rd Conference of Ministers for European Affairs of the German Federal States held in December 2023 adopted a resolution on EU macro-regional strategies to increase their political and policy recognition. In February 2023 Priority Area 1B (rail-road-air mobility) and the Interreg Interact programme organised a meeting in Brussels for transport coordinators in all four EU macro-regional strategies to discuss implementation and progress, practices and approaches including an exchange on ways to further develop practical cooperation between the strategies.

In operational terms, the revised action plan from 2020 has proven to be a solid basis for work. Consequently, no proposals for further revisions were tabled. However, recent presidencies initiated a process to adapt the Strategy institutionally and thematically to the changing environment and emerging future needs. During its presidency in 2023, Slovenia took an

initiative resulting in 13 recommendations for better involvement of all strategy stakeholders being issued, to better reflect the needs of a changing environment.

This led to a revision of the Strategy's governance architecture paper as well as of the Strategy's rules of procedures. Slovenia also promoted thematic discussions on the future development of Danube region, focussing on the necessary adaptations in the societies and economies triggered by the green and digital transformations. The topics of a future society based on knowledge, professions of the future and talent management in the region were comprehensively discussed through an inter-generational dialogue.

During the reporting period, the Strategy proved to be crisis-resilient, both in meeting the challenges posed by the pandemic and in adapting agile to the new geopolitical framework conditions due to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. A key success factor for ensuring the smooth, efficient and continuous cooperation within the framework of the Strategy during that period has been a solid governance architecture – including clear tasks of the presidencies, the Trio cooperation and a well-functioning Danube Strategy Point which has further developed its role as strategic secretariat of the Strategy and as a comprehensive technical support unit for the work done in the priority areas.

Delivering on the green, digital and fair transitions

Overall, the contribution of the Strategy to the green, digital and fair transitions is high especially in the case of the green transition. It is nevertheless a challenge as the Danube region is very heterogenous from a socio-economic point of view. Based on the 2023 Regional Innovation Scoreboard, the region includes some of the strongest but also some of the weakest innovators in Europe. Similarly, according to Eurostat (2022), the region has some of the lowest but also some of the highest rates of population at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

In the field of **green** and sustainable transition, the [REVITAL I project](#) delivered a comprehensive environmental assessment of natural resources revitalisation of the abandoned Solotvyno salt mine in Ukraine with the overall aim of preventing further pollution of the Upper-Tisza Basin. (*Priority Area 4 - Water Quality; Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine Interreg*)

The Danube Lighthouse [DALIA](#) project is developing an integrated tool for better decision-making and improved restoration of fresh and transitional water ecosystems in the Danube river basin. (*Priority Area 4 - Water Quality; Horizon Europe*)

The [STOPFIRES](#) project aimed at increasing environmental resilience to climate change and improving fire and disaster management in cross-border protected areas (*Priority Area 5 – Environmental Risk; Interreg Hungary-Serbia*) while [SpongeCity](#) aims to combat flash floods and droughts in urban areas. This project developed a toolbox of earth observation tools and a 3D database for decision makers and constructed rain gardens as demonstration investments. (*Priority Area 5 – Environmental Risk; Interreg Danube Region*)

The [Danubeparks LIFE WILD island](#) project aims to strengthen ecological connectivity and preserve the natural wilderness in the heart of Europe by improving the coherence of the NATURA 2000 network. The project plans to improve the conservation status of 1,267 hectares of softwood riparian forests. (*Priority Area 6 – Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality; LIFE*)

Actions in the field of sustainable energy, notably promoting the use of renewable energy sources, energy efficiency and novel technologies, especially related to energy storage as well as sustainable transport modes also receive attention. [NRGCom](#) project supports the creation

of energy communities based on renewable energies (*Priority Area 2 – Sustainable Energy; Interreg Danube Region*) while [GeoHeCo](#) has the objective to increase the penetration of shell geothermal energy in the region through the installation of shell geothermal heat funds into existing fossil fuel domestic and cooling systems. (*Priority Area 2 – Sustainable Energy; Interreg Danube Region*)

Sustainable public transport solutions and innovative governance schemes for improving connectivity are supported by the [SUSTANCE](#) (*Priority Area 1B – Rail-Road-Air Mobility; Interreg Central Europe*).

The **digital** transition is covered by various activities. Two recent projects (*Priority Area 8 – Competitiveness of Enterprises; Interreg Danube Region*) address the issues of circular economy and digitalisation. The [Plan-C](#) project consortium consisting of 14 partners from nine Danube countries aims to boost the transformation of the plastics value chain in the region towards circularity through the transnational cooperation of plastics processors/producers and the machine industry implying a radical shift of mindsets, behaviour, and business paradigms. [WE.Circular](#) comes as a response to the specific needs of female-led SMEs in the region. The project helps to identify needs and challenges these entrepreneurs face in their digital and circular economy transition.

[DECIDE](#) empowers SMEs, start-ups and economic development organisations to embrace the circular economy. The project delivers practical methods and tools to foster innovative business models, offering cross-border knowledge exchange and hands-on support through pilot projects. (*Priority Area 7 - Knowledge Society; Interreg Danube Region*)

The [RIS4DANU](#) project aims to facilitate social-sustainable-technological transition in Danube regions through the revitalisation of disused industrial sites. At the heart of the project is the objective to apply an evidence-based smart specialisation approach to support place-based innovation for green/digital and inclusive transitions in regions along the Danube River. (*Priority Area 7 - Knowledge Society; Horizon Europe*)

Building on previous projects [COMEX²](#) supports a harmonised implementation and optimisation of river information services in Europe. With a focus on the future-oriented further development of the transnational portals as well as national systems and services, the project also includes improving the resilience of the systems and services. (*Priority Area 1A – Waterways Mobility; Interreg Danube Region*)

To ensure a **fair** transition, various initiatives were taken. Projects like [Fem2forests](#), help to respond to the demands of the labour market by developing innovative career pathways for the efficient involvement of women at different levels and stages in forestry organisations and relevant labour markets. (*Priority Area 9 - People & Skills; Interreg Danube Region*)

Another example is [Back on Track](#), which promotes the (re)integration of NEETS (people Not in Education, Employment, or Training) in rural areas into education, training and labour market helps to establish the critical mass of initiatives and key-actors for promoting changes in labour-related policy-frameworks envisaged by the Strategy. (*Priority Area 9 - People & Skills; Interreg Danube Region*)

By focusing on agro-biodiversity, food heritage and local identity, the objective of the [SReST](#) project is to broaden the socially responsible sustainable tourism offer by promoting slow food tourism based on the exploration of gastronomic traditions and the local communities that preserve them. (*Priority Area 3 – Tourism & Culture; Interreg Danube Region*)

Finally, in the area of security (*Priority Area 11; Security*) the 9th and 10th joint operations under DARIF ([DAnube RIver Forum](#)) took place in September 2022 and 2023. Operations covered trafficking in human beings, human smuggling, document forgery, actions against illegal immigration and detection of smuggling of drugs. In 2023, because of joint operations, a total of 36 illegal activities were detected.

Supporting EU enlargement

With five participating candidate countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine), the Strategy serves as an interface between current and future EU Member States promoting shared goals and objectives related to regional development, connectivity, and sustainability. This is why the Strategy has a significant role to play as a platform for capacity building and cooperation and, thanks to the consecutive presidencies of Ukraine, Slovenia and Austria, enlargement has been mainstreamed into almost every key activity and event.

From the side of the candidate countries, cooperation within the Strategy is seen as a valuable step on the way to EU membership. A clear advantage of macro-regional cooperation is that it gives the possibility for candidate countries to work on an equal footing with EU Member States. Cooperation within the Danube aids in accelerating the process of adaptation of national legislation to EU legislation. It contributes to capacity building and developing the institutional capacity of candidate countries and facilitates the expansion of cooperation due to access to EU funding instruments. Efforts have included knowledge sharing, particularly in areas such as transport legislation, decarbonisation and energy transition, helping candidate countries align with EU standards and reduce dependencies on external influences. It has helped Ukraine to meet its obligations under the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, particularly in the spheres of regional development, skills, financial control, innovations, navigation and environmental protection. As a result, the principles of green transition and safe energy-efficient transport were considered during the development of national policies, notably the Ukrainian National Strategy for Regional Development for 2021-2027 and the revised National Transport Strategy.

Activities launched by individual priority areas provides capacity building and support the accession process. Priority Area 2 (sustainable energy) organised a workshop in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina to transfer experiences in the use of geothermal energy for district heating and to present the available funding instruments for the decarbonisation of the district heating systems.

The Disaster Management Working Group within Priority Area 5 (environmental risks) initiated several projects and equipped Serbian and Bosnian volunteer and civil protection organisations. They helped to develop a multilingual glossary of disaster management terms and organised large-scale exercises on flood protection and vegetation fires to share knowledge.

Responding to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

For more than two years, Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine has been attacking the country's economy and infrastructure as well as the lives of its citizens. All Danube countries have condemned in the strongest terms the continuation of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine. Danube Ministerial meetings also encouraged all stakeholders to make use of the structures offered by the Strategy to support Ukraine and to contribute to its reconstruction. In particular, Ministers stressed that Russia's repeated military strikes on Danube port infrastructure, grain storage facilities and surrounding areas undermine global food security and are significant threats to the freedom of navigation on the Danube as well as environmental threats to the entire Danube and Black Sea ecosystem.

The political declarations in favour of Ukraine were followed up by several activities. The 2023 Slovenian Presidency, together with priority area coordinators of Priority Area 10 (Institutional Capacity & Cooperation), Danube Civil Society Forum and the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics organised a panel discussion at the 2023 annual forum on the theme of Bottom-up recovery and transformation of Ukraine – the path of Ukraine and Moldova on their way to the EU. The focus was on how the Strategy can build an environment where local, regional and civil society actors could help generate the biggest yields in terms of their contribution to the accession process of Ukraine and Moldova.

Priority Area 1B (Rail-Road-Air mobility) provided help in establishing refugee corridors between the EU and Ukraine including solidarity lanes and supported reopening of railway lines or freight corridors. Following the impacts of the war on energy supply and security Priority Area 2 (Sustainable Energy) made Russian natural gas phaseout in the Danube countries a top priority, notably by a study made by the Hungarian [REKK](#) foundation.

Several events organised by the Ukrainian team of Priority Area 9 (People & Skills) such as the [11th Priority Area 9 International Stakeholder Conference](#) had a strong focus on the consequences of Russia's war of aggression in education, social and labour systems. Moreover, results from the [D-CARE Lab](#) project addressing social innovation in the context of demographic change and care have been adapted and applied in Ukraine to build up social services (*Priority Area 10 – Institutional Capacity & Cooperation; Interreg Danube region*).

The Danube European Social Fund Managing Authority Network was used to identify ways to meet the needs of Ukrainian refugees through ESF-funded projects.

Promoting cohesion and place-based development

The Strategy provides a political framework that allows participating countries to make better use of joint development potential. It has an important integrative and cohesive function and brings together local and regional actors to jointly promote and implement EU policy priorities. Through joint, synchronised actions local, regional and national actors aim at common goals and face common problems of the entire region. Multi-level governance is pursued by involving universities, local governments, regional development agencies and technology parks.

This is for example how the Strategy helps Serbian institutions address cross-border challenges more effectively and promote wider regional cooperation. Through a joint Hungary-Serbia initiative developed within the framework of the International Commission of the Protection of the Danube River, activities were expanded to all the countries of the region with the aim of developing a Danube-wide water balance.

Local action is also targeted by funding support from EU centrally managed programmes. The cross macro-regional [SMART ERA project](#) kicked off in 2024. It aims to combat depopulation in rural areas by making them more attractive and fit for the twin transition. This will be done through a community-led process that addresses demographic changes, digitalisation, participation, green/fair transition and social transition (*Priority Area 10 – Institutional Capacity & Cooperation; Horizon Europe*).

Moreover, the initiative to promote local low-carbon energy actions puts special emphasis on renewable electricity generation as a cornerstone of energy communities enables the spread of comprehensive systems, such as e.g. the European Energy Award that facilitate the daily operation work of local authorities in their municipal energy planning, but also methods from other initiatives and related projects that support the setup of new and the expansion of existing energy communities in a broader sense, to assist municipalities to elaborate their Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (*Priority Area 2 – Sustainable Energy*).

The partnership – involving civil society, local communities and young people

Enhancing democracy, sound administration and strong involvement of civil society and youth is one of the five strategic objectives of the Strategy and on which a range of activities are carried out. The Danube Participation Days organised by Priority Area 10 (Institutional Capacity & Cooperation) cooperation with the Danube Civil Society Forum, their Danube Local Actors Platform and further civil society organisations from the region, explicitly address the role of civil society and local actors in achieving strategic goals of the Strategy. Additionally, after a break during the pandemic, national participation days are again being organised in individual Danube countries.

Civil society non-governmental organisations active in the region include the Budapest-based European House, the Foster Europe Foundation and the Agapedia Foundation. European House organised Macro-Regional Citizen Agoras in 2023 and 2024. Organisations like the Budapest Firefighter Association and various other civil organisations contribute to disaster response and preparedness efforts.

The involvement of local stakeholders varies between participating countries. Some local authorities are very active, and also smaller municipalities play a vital role in Danube wide-projects, networks and activities, as well as twin towns and local partnerships. Other levels of government, for example regional councils, have been involved in partnerships with other Danube Strategy countries. The [DANUBE4all](#) five-year EU Lighthouse Initiative project funded by Horizon Europe uses a model based on the inclusion of stakeholders and communities in river restoration efforts.

The [Friends of the Danube Camps](#) provide an opportunity for young people to meet their peers from across the Danube region and to get in touch with local environmental organisations. Activities include guided workshops for youngsters, where they can talk with experts from various fields, such as rangers from national parks, researchers from biological institutions, local tourist organisations, water conservation experts, non-governmental organisations, etc. The objective is to connect, empower and activate youth in protection and enhancement of biodiversity and to experience the river in adventurous way, through fun and engaging activities (*Priority Area 3 - Culture & Tourism*).

Cooperation with the business sector is diverse and varies across priority areas. Engagement typically occurs through collaborative projects and participation in conferences and workshops. As an example, Priority Area 2 (Sustainable Energy) organised workshops in 2023 to showcase Hungarian geothermal energy practices, attracting local district heating companies for discussions and business-to-business (B2B) meetings.

The [Danube Youth Council](#) was set up in 2022. It ensures the involvement of young people in all Strategy bodies with the aim to make ideas and viewpoints of young people heard and considered. The Youth Council is made up of 28 members (18-29 years of age), two members from each of the 14 Strategy countries. Members are selected in their personal capacity and do not represent any organisation. During the reporting period, two capacity building sessions were organised and Youth Council members participated at all governance meetings.

Additionally, the [Danube Youth Organisation Network](#) is now in the process of being established. This body will bring together national or regional youth organisations or other entities working on youth issues with a non-profit profile in the region.

Improving governance and administrative capacity

As macro-regional cooperation spans a considerable number of policy fields, it is important that the coordination at national and regional level has the right competence to deal with the wide variety of topics. This is achieved when ministries with a coordinating role work closely together with key line ministries. During the reporting period such arrangements were further developed in several countries. Some (e.g. Moldova) have set out the principles for their participation in the Strategy in national law.

Most Danube countries have set up inter-ministerial coordination bodies at national level. These bodies include other key stakeholders such as national authorities responsible for Interreg programmes and social partners. Cooperation with the other macro-regional strategies has been continued through meetings of the chairpersons of the other three Trio Presidencies and the European Commission, as a platform for structured and continued exchanges, strengthened coordination and streamlining of approaches on processes and horizontal topics. It also takes place at the level of individual priority areas. The ministerial meetings regularly organised in connection with annual fora are considered very useful for securing commitment from the political level. Strategy stakeholders at all levels are satisfied with the work carried out by the Danube Strategy Point. Priority Area 1A (Waterways Mobility) and Priority Area 11 (Security) have been involved in or organised their own ministerial meetings.

The Trio Presidency format showed its strengths during the Ukrainian Presidency in 2022. The other two Trio members, Slovakia and Slovenia together with the Strategy Point helped to ensure that planned events and core meetings could be held. Due to the war, the 2022 annual forum was arranged in Košice, Slovakia close to the Ukrainian border. Ukraine provided the content of the conference while Slovakia was responsible for the venue. Slovenia and Austria have been supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina in its preparations for the 2025 Presidency.

Nevertheless, a challenge identified by many stakeholders is the need for more stability at the level of priority areas. Several steering groups struggle with low attendance and members often change and do not always have the right competence. Such fluctuation and lack of continuity lowers the efficiency as new members require additional support and capacity building to be able to contribute efficiently to the achievements of the priority area. In addition, the mandates of steering group members vary. While some have the necessary means to make decisions others have limited capacity to engage.

These are challenges that need to be addressed as individual steering group members have particularly important roles to play in connecting the work of the priority area with the planning and definition of national policies in their countries. Organised capacity building activities, including on-boarding sessions for new members and participation at events and thematic discussions are means to improve the situation. It also helps if themes brought up by priority areas are selected in such a way that they motivate steering group members to engage actively.

Access to funding and embedding

The transnational Interreg Danube Region Programme continues to be the most utilised source of funding for implementing projects under the Strategy action plan. Over the years, a process of ongoing integration and alignment between the Strategy and the programme has helped in developing and co-financing projects. Moreover, the Danube Region Programme also funds the Strategy Point and the work of the 12 Danube priority area coordinators.

Compared to previous periods, the process of embedding was much improved in this period. Experience shows that close ties with managing authorities are essential to allow for an effective embedding process and these authorities must be engaged from the very start of the

programming period. Including national coordinators as members or observers in national cohesion policy programme monitoring committees improves the coordination as does representatives of those programmes participating in the national/regional macro-regional strategy coordination structures.

Managing authority networks exist for programmes funded by the European Regional Development Fund-Cohesion Fund, European Social Fund+ and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument. The Danube Embedding Week, organised annually by the Strategy Point, is positively assessed by stakeholders. With thematic workshops, it brings together Strategy stakeholders and programming and managing authorities in a joint dialogue on embedding issues, moving from programming to the implementation phase.

Additional funding sources include other Interreg programmes in the region (both cross-border and transnational) as well as the pre-accession assistance and the neighbourhood, development and international cooperation instruments. Funding has also been allocated from regional and national cohesion policy programmes. Programmes with focus on environment, transport, business development and employment are most frequently used. Mainstream cohesion policy programmes are also used for macro-regional strategy capacity building. In Hungary, the National Implementation Operational Programme Plus funds a project to support the national coordination of the Strategy.

But the embedding approach goes beyond cohesion policy and for some priority areas the most significant contribution comes from EU funded programmes managed directly by the Commission, including the LIFE programme, Horizon Europe, Erasmus and the Connecting Europe Facility.

Nevertheless, access to national and regional funding is still a challenge, in particular in candidate countries.

Measuring impact through monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy is coordinated by the Strategy Point. A comprehensive monitoring approach for the Strategy was introduced in February 2022. The monitoring concept brings together different reporting strands in one overall online reporting tool.

In addition, all Strategy key implementers and stakeholders are invited to provide relevant studies, reports, etc. (e.g. carried out by priority areas) to the Strategy Point and to participate in evaluation activities carried out by external experts, such as interviews and online surveys.

The Strategy evaluation plan was updated in 2023. It outlines the evaluation strategy and ensures the quality of evaluations carried out. A dedicated steering group with all key stakeholders represented was set up to oversee the evaluation of the Strategy. In January 2024, a call for proposals for conducting a process and implementation evaluation was opened. The aim is to assess the strategic dimension, governance and technical implementation of the Strategy.

Communicating the Strategy

Communicating the Strategy is one of the core tasks of the Strategy Point, while priority areas, together with national and regional administrations, also have roles to play in this regard.

In line with the Danube Communication Strategy and the Communication Guide, activities over the last two years prioritised the production of high-quality communication material for dissemination, strengthening brand awareness and increasing digital presence through the Strategy website and social media platforms. The Danube Strategy Brand Book created in August 2023 serves as a guide to ensure consistent use of the visual identity of the Strategy.

The Strategy website and intranet served as indispensable communication tools, facilitating engagement with stakeholders and the wider public to disseminate information regarding cooperation and funding opportunities while also serving as repositories for institutional memory.

Under the 2023 Slovenian Presidency, a series of narratives to highlight the influence of the Strategy within the Danube region was developed. Employing a narrative framework, two distinct social media campaigns were conducted in 2022 and 2023 to raise the visibility of the so-called Danube Strategy Flagship projects. Subsequently, a subset of these flagship narratives was adapted into 12 promotional videos and e-banners within an online campaign for 2024. These were posted online on YouTube and have resulted in a notable organic increase in both website traffic and social media engagement.

Particular emphasis was placed on the organisation of the annual fora. All three – Košice, Slovakia in 2022, Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia in 2023 and Vienna, Austria in 2024 – highlighted key priorities identified by the Presidencies of Ukraine (2022), Slovenia (2023) and Austria (2024). And all annual fora included a ministerial meeting with high level political participants.

The priority areas of the Strategy actively participate in panel discussions and as workshop organisers during the annual Macro-Regional Strategy Week in Brussels organised by the Commission. In addition, many organise events that contribute to raising the visibility of the Strategy. Some events have become well-established fora for debate and discussion, such as the Danube Region Transport Days organised by Priority Area 1B (rail-road-air mobility) and the Priority Area 9 (People & Skills) Annual Stakeholder Conference. Additionally, during 2023 Priority Area 8 (Competitiveness of Enterprises) successfully organised two major events.

The Danube Strategy uses social media channels as prime tools for reaching and engaging larger online communities and the Danube Strategy Point manages the main channels (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube). A new page dedicated to young people from the Danube region – Danube for Youth – was created within the Strategy web-based application providing information about the Danube Youth Council, internships, and scholarships for students and graduates.

The way forward

Looking ahead, stakeholders agree that the Strategy should continue to support the green, digital and fair transitions in the Danube region. In this respect, the added value of the Strategy lies in its multi-level, cross-sectoral, multi-dimensional approach enabling it to deliver effectively on these core challenges. This is imperative for the future given the increasing effects of climate change and given that the eco system of the Danube River and its tributaries is faced with increasing stressors like droughts and low water.

Moreover, the energy transition needs increased attention. Other key challenges are demographic challenges including brain drain, ageing and the management of human mobility as well as emerging topics such as resilience, risks and security.

In addition, the Strategy should continue efforts to play a key role in facilitating the EU enlargement process. For candidate countries, the Strategy provides opportunities to understand in more detail the inner functioning of the EU and how funds available can be used in the best possible way. Ukraine held the presidency in 2022 and Bosnia and Herzegovina holds it during 2025. This makes EU enlargement a priority but also calls for capacity-building at all levels and in all policy fields to stimulate positive dynamics between local authorities, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders. It should be paired with an inclusive approach which empowers stakeholders as active participants in the macro-region and a regional dimension that connects Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans to the EU, fostering a regional sense of identity.

In terms of strategy governance, it is important to ensure the continuity of implemented activities. This requires stable structures able to implement cross-sectoral and multi-faceted policy areas. It also includes reinforcing the coordination between policies thematically relevant for the Strategy.

As to the actual results, many innovative and successful projects and processes have been launched with the help of the Strategy. However, to maximise the impact, cross-border and national and regional cohesion policy programmes as well as programmes directly managed by the Commission would need to be better in taking up these results with the aim of creating project chains.

Funding is still an issue, particularly in some countries. This is why certain stakeholders keep arguing in favour of funding to be allocated to the macro-regional strategies, mainly to fund small pilot projects. For the next funding period, there is also a call to align funding criteria as well as funding mechanisms and intervention logics of programmes with the macro-regional strategies. This also requires a more strategic orientation of the work in the priority areas themselves, so that objectives are pursued that are in line with the overarching policy frameworks of the EU and its Member States.

Cooperation with the other macro-regional strategies already takes place at the level of national coordinators and priority area coordinators and has increased over time. The work carried out within the four Trio Presidencies framework is considered fruitful and there are strong calls for it to be further developed. However, there is still an untapped potential for cooperation, in particular with the Adriatic and Ionian Strategy with a view to a closer EU integration of the Western Balkans countries, as well as with the Alpine Strategy on sectoral policies specific for mountainous regions. Additionally, more strategic cooperation across macro-regional strategies and with sea basin strategies, such as the Common Maritime Agenda for the Black Sea, on specific political priorities and topics should be considered.

Report on the implementation of the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy

Introduction

The Adriatic-Ionian Strategy was adopted in 2014. The region was initially thought of as primarily a maritime functional area defined by the Adriatic and Ionian Sea basin but has meanwhile been reconsidered, to cover a significant terrestrial surface area as well. Home to more than 70 million people, the macro-region faces several challenges which can be tackled more successfully together than on a purely national or local level, including socio-economic disparities, limited research-business cooperation, gaps in transport links and electricity grids, challenges in sustainable fisheries management, environmental threats. Notably the countries from the Western Balkans are faced with insufficient institutional and administrative capacity.

Since its creation, the Strategy has provided a unique platform of cooperation for joint planning of processes, projects, and activities for the sustainable and harmonious development of the entire region. The Strategy covers 10 countries: four EU Member States Croatia, Greece, Italy and Slovenia, five candidate countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, as well as San Marino.

Until now, the Strategy has been focused on four thematic pillars: Blue Growth, Connecting the Region, Environmental Quality, and Sustainable Tourism. During this reporting period, the work of the participating countries has been mostly concentrated on revising the Strategy to bring it in line with new geopolitical conditions and challenges. Through this revision, a fifth pillar has been added, focusing on Improving Social Cohesion and several new horizontal and cross-cutting topics.

Long-term evolution

In the 10 years of its existence, the Strategy has been able to establish and reinforce networks of cooperation and the social capital of trust among stakeholders; it has incentivised the creation of new partnerships in different sectors that have engaged in many initiatives, actions, processes and project, and it has strengthened regional cooperation. Due to its geography on the EU external border and the participation of candidate countries, the Strategy has focused more and more on supporting the EU enlargement process.

Since the Strategy was adopted, the region has witnessed a decade filled with crises. The region's economy was only just beginning to bounce back from the COVID-19-induced recession, but now also needs to grapple with the fallout of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, continuously high inflation, alongside a pressing energy transition and the vulnerabilities associated with the region's still heavy reliance on fossil fuels. Moreover, the Adriatic-Ionian region has been identified as a global climate crisis hotspot, characterised by the impact of climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, droughts and episodes of extreme weather. These threats negatively impact food security, as well as the opportunities for development and population well-being. Countries of South-East Europe are facing serious population decline. Five of the six European countries with the largest population decline between 2012 and 2022 are in the region. The biggest drop in population was in North Macedonia, which in 2022 had 11 per cent fewer inhabitants than in 2012, while Croatia lost 10 per cent of its inhabitants. Current forecasts in the EU indicate that the decline is not expected to be offset by changes in birth rates or net migration rates. This demographic shift poses significant economic and social challenges that cannot be left unaddressed, as they will trigger new and growing territorial disparities as regions age and fall behind in number and skills of their workforce.

Therefore, the participating countries decided to revise the Strategy to stay up to date with the political realities and provide better solutions to the demanding challenges in the region. This revision process has resulted in a significantly revised action plan.

New to the revised action plan is the introduction of a fifth, social pillar, focusing on enhancing youth engagement and employment, and improving cooperation and coordination on working conditions, gender equality and social innovation. The revised action plan also reflects a stronger commitment to digitalisation and climate neutrality, while enhancing the long-term vision for rural areas, human and green capital development, and the farm to fork strategy. The horizontal principles of non-discrimination, gender equality and youth empowerment, as well as a commitment to respect and promote fundamental rights will be mainstreamed across all pillars and actions. In addition, enlargement of the EU will be included as a horizontal theme integrated in all pillars of the revised action plan.

During the reporting period, the Strategy has significantly improved its governance and implementation support structure, now consisting of three separate projects funded through the Interreg Adrion Programme. This new three-branched support structure should significantly improve the overall performance of the Strategy. Effective multilevel governance will be ensured by enhancing the active participation of regions, local authorities, academia, youth, business, and civil society organisations.

Delivering on the green, digital and fair transitions

Overall, the Strategy contributes to the **green transition** and environmental sustainability through a range of initiatives and projects. Pillar 3 is specifically dedicated to ensuring a good environmental and ecological status of the marine and coastal environment, to contributing to the goals of the EU Biodiversity Strategy and to improving waste management. All other pillars feature sustainability as a horizontal aspect of their actions and have increased efforts through a number of flagships in line with the objectives of the European Green Deal.

The project “Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems” ([**PET HAB ECO**](#)) aims to improve the resilience of large carnivores’ populations at transnational level. The project activities are related to conservation and restoration of large carnivore populations, public awareness activities to bring these unique species to the public’s attention and restoration of ecosystems in which they play a key role. This Pillar 3 flagship project has been approved for funding under the Interreg Adrion Programme.

The Pillar 4 project “Promotion of natural and cultural heritage to develop sustainable tourism in protected areas” ([**PRONACUL**](#)), funded from the Interreg Adrion Programme, focuses on promotion and preservation of natural and cultural heritage and supports the development of transnational strategies for jointly promoting the Adriatic-Ionian region as a tourist destination. Partners and/or associated partners have heritage sights, protected by UNESCO or Natura 2000 or will become protected sights within PRONACUL's pilot areas.

Another example is the flagship project of Pillar 3 “North Adriatic Maritime Incident Response System” ([**NAMIRS**](#)), which consists of cooperation mechanisms and measures ensuring a high level of preparedness and response to emergency marine pollution in Slovenia, Croatia, and Italy. This flagship project is also a good example for embedding: after its development into a bankable project under work package two of the Facility Point Project, it has received co-financing under a call of the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

The **digital** transition is essential for the competitiveness of enterprises in the region and is relevant for all priority areas. Activities have included the facilitation of knowledge transfer in the naval industry, and reducing barriers to innovation between universities, centres of research

and enterprises. Digitalisation will be one of the horizontal objectives of the revised action plan, notably through the establishment of a network of digital innovation hubs in the region.

The project [EUREKA](#), funded from the Interreg Adriatic Programme, focuses on the development and harmonisation of procedures and regulations in maritime safety. Through the establishment of the Maritime Safety Permanent Transnational Network, harmonising vessel traffic services, and introducing sea traffic management services, EUREKA contributes significantly to optimising logistical processes in maritime transport and ports via digital innovation.

Through the development of a Macro-Regional Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) on Blue Growth and the setting up of a dedicated Innovation Community, [BLUEAIR](#) aims at enhancing the institutional capacities of Adriatic-Ionian territories in the definition of a common S3 policy on blue growth and guaranteeing the alignment of local initiatives with the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy. Adopting a coordinated approach will improve administrative capacities, innovativeness, and economic development for participating territories as well as for the whole Adriatic-Ionian region. This Pillar 1 project has been funded under the Interreg Adriatic Programme.

The [Adrinetbook](#) project, also funded through the Interreg Adriatic Programme, aims at promoting, valorising and protecting cultural heritage in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Through conservation of specific cultural heritage and its digitalisation, this type of cultural heritage will become available to the wider public by building a Cultural Heritage network and digitisation of specific cultural heritage that will become a tool for the sustainable development of the whole region.

The Adriatic-Ionian region faces significant **social and economic challenges**, including an ageing population, labour market imbalances, social exclusion, the inflow of refugees, poverty pockets and brain drain. On top of this, it was widely affected by the pandemic, especially due to its dependency on tourism, with a major impact on the labour market. The Recovery and Resilience Plans of the EU Member States together with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans have been key instruments for mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic, as well as the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Supporting high-quality employment opportunities, continued education, apprenticeships and traineeships, they have complemented EU cohesion policy and Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance funding, in combination with EU sectorial programmes.

To ensure a **fair** transition, the revised action plan will align the Strategy with the EU strategies and policies for improving social cohesion. It will aim to create a demand and supply for new and relevant skills, promote social cohesion, contribute from the macroregional context to achieve equal opportunities, youth engagement and access to the labour market.

The project [SI4CARE](#), funded from the Interreg Adriatic Programme, is focused on social innovation for integrated healthcare services for the ageing population in the Adriatic-Ionian region. This project has facilitated the creation of a transnational effective ecosystem through a collaboration network and a shared strategy translated into regional and national action plans, with pilots in telemedicine and healthcare accessibility to healthcare facilities.

[TESI](#) aims at establishing a partnership for the formulation of a Joint Master Programme on Social Innovation. The project, funded by the Interreg Adriatic Programme, focuses on raising competences and skills on social innovation through capacity building approaches, while establishing a network of universities and research centres to define and implement the master programme.

Supporting EU enlargement

The Strategy is the only EU macro-regional strategy with more candidate countries than EU Member States. Cooperation within the Strategy is seen as a valuable step on the way to the EU membership, as it provides an opportunity for accession countries to work on an equal footing with EU Member States. During the reporting period and as part of the EU's response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the enlargement agenda has gained new momentum. The first Intergovernmental Conference with Albania and with North Macedonia on accession negotiations took place in July 2022, and the analytical examination of the EU *acquis* (screening) process has been ongoing since then. In December 2022, the European Council granted Bosnia and Herzegovina EU candidate status on the understanding that the country implements the steps specified in the Commission's October 2022 communication on enlargement policy. In March 2024, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and invited the Commission to prepare the negotiating framework.

The integration of the Western Balkan candidate countries has become a top priority of the EU and the candidate countries participating in the Strategy and has contributed to the decision of the participating countries to revise the Strategy and its action plan, to ensure a stronger integration of its support for enlargement. Through the revised action plan, all pillars and topics will contribute to the EU enlargement processes in the Adriatic-Ionian region and will help the candidate countries to prepare their accession and align with key EU policies and frameworks.

The accession process presents a unique opportunity to accelerate the region's transition to greener economies. Simultaneously, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and substantial investment through the Economic and Investment Plan emphasise the importance of good environmental governance. The accession negotiation chapters related to regional policy and coordination of structural instruments as well as the environment have pivotal roles in guiding the Western Balkans' efforts towards sustainable growth. The implementation of these chapters will require significant administrative capacities and strategic planning that the Strategy will help to develop. Since the largest part of the *acquis* is implemented by local authorities, their participation will be strongly encouraged.

Responding to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

The territory of the Strategy is not directly affected by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, its side effects, including refugee movements, inflation, rising food and energy prices, have had a significant impact requiring joint actions of the participating countries, in close coordination with EU institutions.

Since 2022, the participating countries have continually expressed their solidarity with Ukraine. In their declarations adopted at Ministerial meetings held in Tirana (May 2022), Sarajevo (May 2023) and Šibenik (May 2024), representatives of the participating governments, condemned the illegal, unprovoked and unjustified aggression of Russia against Ukraine. Moreover, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has highlighted the issue of energy security, which of particular importance in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

Promoting cohesion and place-based development

The Strategy is a political and strategic framework that aims to coordinate and harmonise EU policy implementation, at national as well as sub-national level. The governance model involves multiple levels, including local, regional and national actors. Furthermore, local and community-based stakeholders are directly involved in the implementation of the Strategy, as beneficiaries or stakeholders to Strategy-related projects. Cohesion policy represents an

invaluable instrument for place-based development also through its territorial and partnership approach.

The involvement of local and community based stakeholders has been promoted through relevant events, which involved stakeholders across the Adriatic-Ionian region: For example, the event “Green and Smart Ports in the Adriatic-Ionian Region”, held in Trieste in June 2022 as part of the Work Plan of Pillar 2 “Connecting the Region”, subgroup Transport, brought together representatives from territorial cooperation in Italy, Croatia and Slovenia, to discuss best practices among the partners of the three countries in the environmental field and to foster an integrated and sustainable approach to solving shared problems.

A successful project example is the flagship of Pillar 2 “ADRIatic IONian CYCLE route for sustainable TOURism” ([ADRIONCYCLETOUR](#)). The project aims to make the area more attractive and accessible through the promotion of sustainable tourism linked to cycling. The main objective is to enhance the cycling route along the coast of the Adriatic in Italy and Slovenia, including its main cycle connections to the hinterland areas, thus developing an innovative and attractive cross-border and transnational tourism product. The project is funded from the Interreg Italy–Slovenia programme, with support also from the Friuli Venezia Giulia ERDF 21-27 Programme and from the Interreg Italy–Croatia programme, which financed different cycle routes.

The partnership – involving civil society, local stakeholders and young people

Civil society has been involved in implementing and communicating the Strategy, particularly through the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative and its networks. Three fora are particularly active: the forum of the Adriatic Ionian Chambers of Commerce, the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities and the Association of the Universities of the Adriatic and Ionian region. These fora represent a network of more than 120 bodies and institutions and have organised key events involving Strategy stakeholders, including in the framework of the Annual Fora held in Tirana and Sarajevo.

The Budapest-based European House organised Citizen Agoras in 2023 and 2024, building on preparatory events held in all macro-regions, including in the Adriatic-Ionian region, and promoting a more systematic involvement of civil society in the strategies.

Moreover, the projects [AI-NURECC plus](#) and [Raising awareness on the Youth Manifesto in the Western Balkans](#), funded by the Commission, have played an important role in engaging key civil society stakeholders, promoting an efficient participatory and bottom-up approach, raising awareness of the Strategy and promoting local stakeholders’ involvement in relevant events and actions. The overall extent of systematic involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in the Strategy should be increased.

The involvement of **local stakeholders** varies between participating countries. Some local authorities are very active. Stakeholders have identified as a challenge that not all local stakeholder groups are equally represented in the Strategy structures. Some countries and sectors might have better channels for participation than others, and the extent of local stakeholder involvement may often depend on specific projects.

Strategy stakeholders have recognised the importance of bringing **young people** into the governance and giving them a platform for their ideas to improve their region. Initiatives, such as [EUSAIR4Youth](#), funded by the Commission, have already shown the benefits of equipping young people with practical skills and giving them real challenges to address. [Popri EUSAIR Youth](#) has been encouraging students from all countries of the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region to compete to win with their innovative ideas in the form of business models. Young people have

been invited to attend the Annual Fora of the Strategy, to actively take part in the discussions with decision-makers.

In 2022, the participating countries agreed to establish a Youth Council for the Strategy. Over a two-year period, the process of launching the Youth Council was taken forward, including a comprehensive youth consultation which allowed over 556 participants to contribute their views on the mandate, format and selection of this Youth Council.

20 Youth Council members were identified and nominated in autumn 2024, two per participating country, all aged between 18 and 29. The Youth Council will ensure active youth participation and representation of the perspectives of young people in all structures of the Strategy, aiming at more inclusive policies that better address the needs and aspirations of young people from all kinds of backgrounds, and fostering intergenerational dialogue and understanding.

Youth will also continue to play a more important role through the revised action plan, which includes enhanced youth engagement and employment in its newly introduced thematic pillar on Improved Social Cohesion. In this respect, the Strategy should aim at creating a stronger link with relevant EU policies, enhancing the involvement of young people in public policymaking, including youth representatives in the development and implementation of the Strategy, and promoting activities aiming at increased youth employability.

Improving governance and administrative capacity

The participating countries and key stakeholders have made great efforts to build and ensure an effective and efficient governance for the Strategy at all levels. The annual reports of the four pillars show that most countries have strengthened their internal mechanisms and structures supporting the governance and the implementation of the Strategy by enlarging their multi-level, multi-sectoral teams engaging more relevant ministries and regional administrations.

At the political level, the yearly rotating system of the presidency allows the participating countries to provide guidelines on the actions and priorities of the Strategy. Together with the establishment of the Trio presidency system, this ensures continuity and exchange of best practices. During the Annual Forum, a Ministerial meeting including Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers responsible for EU funds, is organised and concludes with the adoption of a political declaration.

The Governing Board meets biannually and constitutes the interface between the political level of national coordinators and the operational level of pillar coordinators. It provides strategic guidance to Thematic Steering Groups for the implementation and management of the Strategy and its action plan, coordinates their work and ensures linkages between them. During 2024, the work of the Governing Board, supported by the national coordinators and pillar coordinators, was mostly focused on the revision of the Strategy.

The Thematic Steering Groups under each priority sector represent the implementation level. They identify key processes, priorities and projects in line with the objectives of the Strategy and “match-make” between project proposals and available funds. Each Thematic Steering Group is led by at least two Pillar Coordinators, one from an EU Member State and one from a non-EU country. Meetings of the Thematic Steering Groups are held at least twice a year, with varying participation of their members depending on the priority area. Certain countries record high participation levels while others are more uneven in terms of their participation. In the post-pandemic context, meetings of the Thematic Steering Groups have been held partly in-person, partly online or in hybrid format. When organised in-person, travel and accommodation costs are provided by the Facility Point. Nonetheless, regular attendance, in some cases, has

been hampered by limited human resources. Online and hybrid meetings have often shown a more passive involvement of the members and therefore less fruitful discussions.

Thematic Steering Groups are an important platform for the exchange of best practice, to discuss actions and develop project ideas into bankable projects. In the preparation of the Annual Fora, Pillar Coordinators select the topics of discussion and the speakers for their sessions, often with limited input from their colleagues within the Thematic Steering Groups.

A number of challenges remain, notably as regards political ownership and commitment, as well as empowering members in the governance bodies. Limited institutional capacity, high staff fluctuation, modest funding and shortcomings in implementation and follow-up of the agreed decisions and actions have affected the implementation of the Strategy.

An [evaluation](#) carried out in 2023 brought key findings and recommendations in this respect. The report suggested stronger incentives to tie in with national planning documents, standardisation of working methodologies of the thematic working groups, to support them in delivering results, ensuring smoother implementation and stronger political backing of the Thematic Steering Groups and their members from their home institutions.

Many stakeholders have identified the need to support key implementers (National Coordinators, Pillar Coordinators, Thematic Steering Group members, and the future Youth Council) and relevant stakeholders, and to increase the ownership in relevant line ministries on the national level. Such recognition could also improve the mobilisation of regions, cities, agencies and institutions like universities, private businesses and civil society, encouraging them to network, cooperate and participate in the implementation and development of the Strategy.

Another challenge brought forward is the uneven contribution of national experts to the work of the Strategy across different policy areas. For some sectors, it is difficult to explain the purpose and added value of the Strategy, and to find interested and informed experts.

With the 2021-27 funding period, the Strategy adjusted its governance and implementation support structure. This now consists of three separate strategic projects funded through the Interreg Adrion Programme: The Facility Point (Supporting the governance for improved cooperation), the Stakeholders Engagement Point, and the Strategic Implementation Project. This new three-branched support structure should improve the overall performance of the Strategy, even though it contrasts with the integrated, single project approach of the other three strategies.

The revision of the Strategy has also provided the opportunity to incorporate governance improvements, with a view to

- improving coordination and cooperation to further enhance the commitment to the Strategy and its effective implementation;
- supporting the development of the necessary administrative capacity to ensure that political commitment translates into effective implementation and real actions which affect and benefit territories of each participating country.
- ensuring institutional and effective multilevel governance by enhancing the active participation of regions, local authorities, academia, youth, business, and civil society organisations.

Access to funding and embedding

The Interreg Adrion programme continues to be the most used source of funding for implementing projects under the Strategy. Over the years, integration and alignment between

the Strategy and the programme has greatly helped in developing and co-financing projects. Moreover, through its strategic projects, the programme contributes to the governance structure of the Strategy.

Funding sources also include other Interreg programmes, both cross-border and transnational, in the region). Additional funding sources include the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for candidate countries. Funding for EU Member States has also been allocated from regional and national cohesion policy programmes, and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund. Programmes with a focus on sustainable blue economy, the green and digital transitions in tourism, renewable energy resources, environment, transport, business development and employment are particularly relevant for embedding Strategy projects. Contributions are also provided by programmes directly managed by the Commission such as the LIFE programme, Horizon Europe, Erasmus and the Connecting Europe Facility. Moreover, sectoral and regional cohesion policy programmes can also be relevant for macro-regional strategy capacity building.

Compared to previous periods, steps have been undertaken to accelerate the embedding process. However, integrating the priorities and objectives of the Strategy into EU programmes remains a challenge.

The establishment of networks of managing authorities of cohesion policy funds and National Instrument for Pre-Accession Coordinators responsible for pre-accession funding has been a major step forward in enhancing cooperation during the programming cycle and will need to be further strengthened. Close cooperation with managing authorities and Pre-Accession Coordinators is crucial to allow for an effective embedding process. The matching between available funding under Interreg and other cohesion policy programmes with flagship and labelled projects under the Strategy is key. These authorities must be engaged from the start of programming exercises, through collaboration in the preparation of calls, increased exchange of information at programme level and the implementation of coordinated and complementary projects in the region.

The number of successfully developed bankable projects varies among pillars. Key strategy implementers must continue to make efforts to keep up momentum and to improve their capacity to match-make between funds and project ideas.

Measuring impact through monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy is coordinated by the Facility Point. The monitoring concept is based on three components: the questionnaire of the Commission used for gathering information for this report, annual activity reports for each of the Thematic Steering Groups, coordinated by the respective pillar coordinator, and evaluation activities carried out by external experts. Strategy stakeholders used the opportunity of the revision of the Strategy to substantially rethink its monitoring system, notably by determining indicators and targets for the priorities included in the new action plan.

The last evaluation of the Strategy was carried out in 2022. It assessed results, the appropriateness of the action plan to support its strategic objectives, as well as the quality of the implementation mechanisms and its governance system. The results of the evaluation fed into the revision process, notably as regards efforts to expand the flagship concept and defining a more coherent system of indicators with a common methodology. Moreover, strategy stakeholders decided to establish a stronger link with relevant EU policy frameworks and funding programmes, and to adjust the governance structure, with a view to developing

monitoring systems and enhancing the active participation of a wider group of stakeholders (such as regions, local authorities, academia, youth, business, and civil society organisations).

Communicating the Strategy

Communicating the Strategy is one of the core tasks of the Facility Point and its project partners in the participating countries, in cooperation with the other two strategic projects. It is based on a Communication Strategy which was first developed in 2019 and revised and updated in 2023 and 2024. Those updates brought the Communication Strategy in line with the revised action plan, and the addition of project partners from North Macedonia and San Marino. Strategic communication priorities have focused on raising awareness and visibility about the Strategy among key stakeholders, a common narrative promoting trust, cooperation and transparency, and supporting public diplomacy efforts by conveying a positive image of the macro-region and its contributions.

A Stakeholder Platform has been established which fosters the engagement of stakeholders, offering them the opportunity to interact and collaborate with key implementers on issues concerning matters related to the Adriatic-Ionian region, as well as interactive e-learning modules.

During the reporting period, activities in the field of communication focused on enhancing communication skills of stakeholders and engaging youth. The Communication Academies, held online in 2022 and in Thessaloniki in 2023, were central to equipping a diverse group of stakeholders with enhanced communication skills, ensuring the effective dissemination of the Strategy's main messages. The Academies provided communication training to government communicators, key implementers, journalists and youth participants. This initiative proved crucial in expanding the pool of communicators proficient in disseminating the objectives of the Strategy and significantly improved the clarity and reach of the Strategy's narrative to the broader public. A specific [Youth Communication Academy](#) targeted young individuals interested in macro-regional cooperation and aimed at enhancing their communication capabilities.

[In 2023, the Strategy launched the Press Contest](#), inviting journalists to report on the cooperative framework and its regional benefits. The contest's evaluation criteria focused on the ability to effectively communicate the story of the Strategy, underline its achievements, and emphasise the value of macro-regional cooperation.

The [8th EUSAIR Forum](#) was organised in May 2023 in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The [9th EUSAIR Forum](#) was organised in Šibenik, Croatia in May 2024. Both fora represented a significant opportunity to communicate about the Strategy, its objectives and achievements.

Over the last two years, 21 thematic events were organised in order to exchange key problems encountered in each Strategy pillar with relevant stakeholders. The *Swimming forward! conference on Blue Growth organised in October 2023 in Greece* provided an opportunity to discuss the importance of a sustainable blue economy for achieving results in the areas of the Blue Growth Pillar. More effort was dedicated to social media and updating the Strategy website, which registered more than 28,000 clicks since the last report. Nine newsletters were prepared and shared with over 4,000 subscribers.

The way forward

Looking ahead, the Strategy and its revised action plan will provide an invaluable framework for participating countries to intensify cooperation on their strategic priorities and their vision for the macro-region, to mobilise resources, develop, and overcome challenges together. Due to its geography on the EU external border and the participation of candidate countries, the Strategy will shift its focus towards supporting the EU enlargement process. The candidate countries need support in the transformation of their economies and adjusting and harmonising their legislations. The Strategy can provide an important framework and be a catalyst for peer-exchange and partnerships that promote reform.

The green, digital and social transitions in the Adriatic-Ionian region will feature more prominently in the Strategy in future. Particular attention will have to be paid to the EU commitment to reach climate neutrality by 2050 and the countries of the Western Balkans will have to increase their efforts in this regard. Certain topics, such as water management, litter and waste management, climate adaptation, demography or governance will become even more pressing and can only be solved together with the support of a regional approach. Social and economic disparities need to be reduced and the gender balance in the region enhanced. The newly established Youth Council should become a genuine channel to give young people a place to have a say and to influence policies which are relevant for their regions and their future.

Access to funding and integrating the priorities and objectives of the Strategy into EU programmes remains a challenge. Some stakeholders argue that key strategy implementers need to strengthen their understanding of cohesion programmes, while cohesion programme authorities need support and guidelines on how to support macro-regional strategies.

For the Strategy to be operational and effective, it will be important to strengthen management capacities at the strategic level, enhance effective decision-making and reinforce performance and results orientation. There is a need to empower relevant stakeholders, increase their ownership and encourage them to network, cooperate and participate in the implementation and development of the Strategy. Stronger partnerships with sub-national stakeholders, local and regional authorities, and civil society in the Adriatic-Ionian region are not only invaluable for facilitating enlargement objectives; they are also essential for effective and inclusive development strategies and for improving the quality of social and civic dialogue in candidate countries.

Communication efforts should also expand their outreach to additional multipliers, including engagement with media partners and with the Youth Council, to enhance visibility and increase outreach to young people.

The Strategy should also align its objectives and actions to the United Nations' sustainable development goals.

Cooperation with the other macro-regional strategies should be further strengthened and is notably relevant with the Danube Strategy, with a view to a closer EU integration of the Western Balkans countries. More strategic cooperation across macro-regional strategies and with sea basin strategies, such as the Western Mediterranean initiative, on specific political priorities and topics should be considered.

Report on the implementation of the Alpine Strategy

Introduction

The Alpine Strategy was established in 2015 and brings together five EU Member States (Germany, Italy, France, Austria and Slovenia) and two non-EU Member States (Switzerland and Liechtenstein) across the Alpine region.

The strategy focuses on three main objectives: Economic growth and innovation, Mobility and connectivity and Environment and energy.

Long-term evolution

Over the years, the Strategy has brought an added value to existing cooperation mechanisms by offering a unique transnational, macro-regional dimension. Moreover, it has gained significant importance in contributing to the resilience in and of the Alpine region.

Strategy cooperation helped bring non-EU countries closer to the EU. Switzerland took over the annual rotating Strategy presidency in 2023. It was the first time that a non-EU country had held the presidency of this Strategy. Liechtenstein is co-presiding together with Austria in 2025.

The added value of the Strategy is demonstrated through various policy impacts such as the development of transnational solutions for common challenges through cooperation, knowledge building and exchange, awareness building and common knowledge which translates into visible positive impacts on everyday life for the citizens of the region.

Opportunities for exchange with other macro-regional strategies offered by the Commission and the Interreg Interact programme, such as the Macro-Regional Strategies Week are much appreciated and are used by Strategy stakeholders.

During the reporting period, the Strategy has proven to be crisis resilient. A key success factor for ensuring the smooth, efficient and continuous cooperation within the framework of the Strategy during that period has been a solid governance architecture – including clear tasks for the Presidencies, the Trio cooperation and the continuation of the implementation of the technical secretariat.

In 2022 and 2023, the Strategy continued a process of strengthening its operations with a view to achieving a more focused and operational set of priorities, improved governance and stronger political ownership and visibility towards stakeholders.

The milestones of this process include the agreement on five top priorities by the General Assembly in 2022 under the Italian presidency; confirmation of these indications through cross-cutting priorities approved by the General Assembly of October 2023 under the Swiss presidency; the establishment in 2022 of a support structure called the [Technical Secretariat of the Alpine Strategy](#) as a secretariat for the Strategy; the full operation of the [Youth Council](#) as an official body of the Strategy; the start of the action plan revision process through the General Assembly's Joint Declaration in Bad Ragaz in October 2023; and the setting up of a dedicated Task Force for the revision process.

In order to reflect the development of the governance structures, the changing priorities of the Strategy and to adapt to current challenges and crises, the Strategy is currently undergoing its first revision, after 10 years of existence.

The revision process is expected to be finished towards the end of 2025 under the Austrian-Liechtenstein co-presidency. It includes plans for a new phase of the Green Infrastructure goes

Business Award, discussions with the Commission on the planned EU Nature restoration law and the fostering of exchange with the Alpine Convention's Alpine Biodiversity Board.

At a policy coordination level, the nine thematic Action Groups drafted a set of Strategy policy recommendations in the framework of the [AlpGov 2](#) strategic project funded through the Interreg Alpine Space programme. All triennial work plans of the Action Groups were revised and approved.

Four [cross-cutting priorities](#) were selected as an innovative way to stimulate cooperation between the Action Groups: Promoting Digitalisation for the Alps, Accelerating the Energy Transition for a Carbon-Neutral Alpine Region, Promoting a Joint Water Management Transition and Boosting Circular Economy. These four priorities can be seen as a good practice as they foster cooperation among Action Groups for the achievement of strategy-wide objectives and thus value the different competences and perspectives of the Action Groups contributing to it.

Moreover, the Strategy serves as a tool to deliver territorial cohesion and translate core European political initiatives to the specific features and characteristics of the Alpine region, such as the green and digital transitions, activities designed to address social change as well as the inclusion of civil society and youth.

The Strategy has been a valuable tool to draw the attention of politicians, public administrations, private organisations, small- and medium-sized enterprises, cluster organisations, educational and cultural institutions and civil society organisations to the Alpine region. A key added value of the Strategy is its continuous efforts to bring governance closer to the citizens of the region.

In addition, the Strategy is strongly focused on youth illustrated by the setting up of a [Youth Council](#) already in 2021 under the French presidency. This council gives a voice to Alpine youth in all Strategy governing bodies, from the thematic Actions Groups that implement the Strategy to the General Assembly (consisting of Ministries), through to the Executive Board (National Coordinators). This process was further strengthened during 2022 and 2023 and now the Youth Council has been granted the status of an official body of the Strategy.

During the reporting period, the impact of the pandemic on the activities of the Strategy was less than in previous years. In contrast, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is having an impact on the Alpine region. Especially in the current situation, the Strategy offers added value and the possibility to involve new actors in cooperation and to address strategic challenges such as energy security, the Green Deal, the digital transition and transport issues.

Delivering on the green, digital and fair transitions

The Strategy promotes the **green transition** and environmental sustainability through various initiatives and projects aimed at reducing pollution, promoting sustainable development, enhancing biodiversity conservation, and promoting the circular economy.

For example, [Amethyst](#) (Action Group on economic development) tested hydrogen solutions in French mountainous valleys and paved the way for an Alpine master plan of deployment of hydrogen in the Alpine region with successful application to [Clean Hydrogen partnership](#). It is financed by the [Interreg Alpine Space programme](#).

Another hydrogen project which highlights the importance of hydrogen in the Alpine region – and which also is a good example of the embedding concept – is the [IMAGHyNE](#) project (Action Group on economic development). It brings together more than 40 partners in six different countries (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany and Switzerland). With a duration

of six years (2024-2029), it mobilises a budget of EUR 200 million and has obtained a total grant of EUR 20 million from the European [Clean Hydrogen Partnership](#).

Projects reflecting adaptation to the changing environment and new emerging needs include [TranStat](#) and [BeyondSnow](#) (Action Group on economic development). Both projects have helped French ski resorts in their green and economic transition in elaborating transition scenarios for low mountain ski destinations through a participatory process.

[CERVINO](#) is an energy data management platform to make energy in the Alpine region fit for the future with comprehensive and reliable data for the macro-region (Action Group on Energy-co-financed by the Alpine Space Programme).

The [NICH](#) project, funded by the European Research Council under Horizon 2020 aims to unravel the impact of novel competitors on species' responses to climate change in alpine plant communities.

[MICROCLIM](#) aims at researching the effect of small areas maintaining populations of species outside their range margins of Alpine flora biodiversity. It is funded by Excellent Science-European Research Council.

[AlpBioEco](#) is financed by the Interreg Alpine Space programme and targets the valorisation of innovative bio-economical potentials via bio-based food and botanical extract value chains in the Alpine Space.

The Strategy also promotes **digitalisation** for stimulating economic growth and innovation. It supports the advancement of digital infrastructure, digital skills, and services to improve connectivity, competitiveness, and efficiency, advocating for digitalisation across sectors such as education and transport.

Results of previous actions, such as the EU action for [Smart Villages](#), Open data and Smart SMEs have been integrated into the Strategy policy cycle and, thanks to the new [SupportEUSALP](#) project, have helped to initiate new actions.

These new actions include [SmartCommUnity](#), co-financed by the [Interreg Alpine Space programme](#), which aims at creating smart, sustainable and resilient communities in the Alps through the use of digital technologies. The Strategy had an impact on the topic of [Smart Villages](#), which gained high visibility at the European level and which is also included in the EU's Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas. Several regions in the Alpine area have since declared the Smart Villages approach as one of their main priorities and this approach has been included in some programmes (eg [Interreg Alcotra](#), the cross-border France-Italy programme).

[CIRCULAR4.0](#) : digital technologies as enabler to foster the transition to the circular economy by small- and medium-sized enterprises in the Alpine region (Action Group on digitalisation), co-financed by the Interreg Alpine Space programme.

Activities of communication and connection with the territory continued thanks to the third [Digital Alps Conference](#) (organised by the Action Group on digitalisation) which took place in Courmayeur, Italy in October 2023. With the participation of regional councillors from the Alps and members of the European Parliament and an audience of more than 100 people, the conference discussed the themes of digital transformation of the territory and the importance of artificial intelligence. This conference takes place every year (the 2024 edition held in Izola, Slovenia) and brings together all actors and initiatives dealing with the topic on digitalisation in the Alpine area.

To bring about a **fair** transition, which includes activities related to education and training, the Strategy is focusing on identifying soft skills required in key sectors of the Alpine economy to favour the inclusion of new workers in the Alpine job market, and also on raising awareness of mountain professions and employment opportunities in the Alps in order to make mountain areas attractive for young people and new residents, and thus, contribute to counteracting migration trends towards cities.

The 2022 study [Tools and guidelines for identification and assessment of a set of soft skills related to work-based learning and to the development of alpine economy](#) identifies, develops and validates tools for observing and assessing soft skills relevant for the Alpine economy. The development of tools for the recognition of soft skills by a company tutor is relevant for mobility projects and linked to the European topic of micro-credentials in connection to both dual-based training and life-long learning experiences. This is managed by the Action Group on labour market, education and training.

In the field of **mobility**, the Alpine Strategy benefits from [Connecting Europe Facility funding](#). For example, the Cuneo-Ventimiglia and Nice-Breil-sur-Roya routes have been newly incorporated into the [Trans-European Transport Network](#), granting them access to [Connecting Europe Facility funding](#). This is another good example for embedding with different funding sources.

Cooperation with non-Member States

The Strategy has established close cooperation with Switzerland and Liechtenstein, countries which have participated in the Strategy from the beginning.

The cooperation between the Alpine Member States and the two non-EU countries fosters international cooperation and solidarity through initiatives which strengthen ties between Alpine EU and non-EU cities, regions, and stakeholders. This enhances the resilience and cohesion of the Alpine region as a whole.

Switzerland has played an increasing active role in the Strategy, culminating in the country taking on the annual rotating Presidency in 2023 and several cantons had been involved in events and initiatives. Liechtenstein is co-presiding with Austria in 2025.

Responding to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has an impact on the Alpine region, as national and regional authorities are faced with the need to support refugees and a growing demand for diversification and energy transition. However, considering its geography, scope and ongoing refocusing, the Strategy has not adopted a coordinated vision to address these challenges with explicit reference to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

However, in order to find solutions to the current energy crisis, the Strategy identified the flagship initiative "Energy transition in the transport system in the Alpine Region" on energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable sources. Transport plays an important role in tackling the energy crisis. This sector needs to catch up both in respect of a more efficient use of energy but also in the transition to renewable energy. Today, the transport sector is responsible for roughly one-third of the total energy consumption in the EU and is highly dependent on fossil fuels.

Promoting cohesion and place-based development

The Strategy provides a framework that allows participating countries to make better use of joint development potential. It has an important integrative and cohesive function and brings together local and regional actors to jointly promote and implement EU policy priorities.

Through multi-level governance and joint, synchronised actions, local, regional and national actors achieve common goals and face common problems of the entire region.

The Strategy plays an important role in implementing and upgrading national policies and actions. The strategy is the political and strategic link between general EU policies. It offers a unique and specific territorial translation of EU policies into the Alpine context, defined by political authorities through an inclusive, multilevel and multi-actor governance.

Strategy actions are implemented at territorial level through the work of the [Action Groups](#). Projects managed or inspired by Action Groups directly involve local stakeholders, crucial for implementation and rollout.

Activities related to landscapes and climate change support the implementation of the European Green Deal, the Common Agricultural Policy and the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030. Activities related to territorial brands support the European Green Deal, the Common Agricultural Policy and the Farm to Fork Strategy as well as the sustainable development of less favoured areas in the Alpine Region.

Moreover, a [Climate Adaptation Platform](#) has been set up, which allows adaptation and risk management actors in all Alpine countries to benefit from transnational knowledge sharing, bridging the gap between the generation and the actual use of relevant knowledge and experience.

The [Alpine Strategy labelling](#) (Action Group mobility) identifies additional missing links in the Alpine rail network and projects for the upgrading of local railways that contribute to sustainable mobility in the Alpine Region. For example, in Marseille, Tende and different locations in Tyrol, exchanges were organised between members from the action group and local stakeholders.

Stakeholders from local communities are mostly addressed and consulted through their experience with implemented pilot projects that have been tested in local environments (such as local energy agencies or local regional development agencies). It is important to continue and to develop this multi-level governance.

The partnership – involving civil society, local stakeholders and young people

The Strategy makes considerable efforts to involve civil society at all levels and in many ways, such as through participation in events and conferences organised by Action Groups and the annual presidencies.

The Interreg Alpine Space programme involves civil society organisations, including non-governmental organisations, local communities, and social enterprises by financing projects, organising conferences and various bottom-up initiatives. The projects may focus on sustainability, cultural heritage, and social innovation. Civil society groups are involved in the project implementation and dissemination of results.

The Strategy was the first strategy to set up a [Youth Council](#) (in July 2021) and puts significant efforts in place to ensure effective youth participation to involve young people in its activities, to raise awareness of the Strategy and to encourage young people to think about their connection

to the Alpine region. In particular, the [Pitch your project competition](#) and summer camps result in a strong and persistent commitment of a valuable engagement of youth within the strategy.

Youth Council representatives are present as observers at all levels of Strategy governance. Young people are also involved through local youth organisations and networks. By integrating the youth section into the website, the Strategy could better engage young people from the Alpine region through various events and initiatives. A positive change noted was the introduction of an Interreg Volunteer Youth reporter into the communication unit to better accommodate the perspective of younger generation.

Civil society is also involved via concrete bottom-up projects to empower local communities, making the people of the region co-creators of their own future, such as energy communities, smart cities, multi-modal transport, revitalisation of abandoned spaces for sustainable and inclusive use. Civil society can moreover be consulted on initiatives that impact their local areas which involves collaborative efforts for example to preserve local heritage, improve sustainable tourism, or enhance community resilience to climate change.

These examples show that civil society plays a vital role in shaping and implementing the strategy.

Improving governance and administrative capacity

In the reporting period, the establishment and activation of the [Technical Support Structure](#) in January 2023, was an important step towards improving both governance and the administrative capacity of the Strategy. It facilitates the work of all key stakeholders by providing administrative and technical support for the Strategy's management and development.

During the period covered by this report, the Support Structure was established with a role of a secretariat serving the annual presidencies and the Action Groups, via a strategic project funded ([SupportEUSALP](#)) under the Interreg Alpine Space programme. The Support Structure has reached a good level of operational capability and is still being further improved.

The revision of the action plan is an opportunity to update certain governance-related challenges. These concern the collaboration between the Executive Board and the Board of Action Group Leaders, the performance of the Support Structure and the integration of the Youth Council into Strategy organs and activities.

Nevertheless, while the administrative capacity and governance structures within the Strategy have evolved to facilitate coordination, decision-making, and stakeholder engagement, challenges remain in sustaining political interest, ensuring full stakeholder engagement, and allocating adequate resources for implementation. The introduction of a rotating system of presidencies has contributed to a better planning of presidency programmes and added to their quality and continuity.

Looking ahead, a more effective Strategy governance requires further improvements. Continuing to make the action plan more streamlined and targeted could potentially increase political and stakeholder awareness of the Strategy's role.

Access to funding and embedding

The Interreg Alpine Space Programme continues to be the most used source of funding for implementing projects under the Strategy. Over the years, integration and alignment between the Strategy and the programme has greatly helped in developing and co-financing projects. A clear contribution to the Strategy is considered as an advantage during the project selection

process. Moreover, the programme also funds the Support Structure and the work of the nine Action Groups.

Additional funding sources include other Interreg programmes in the region, and national and regional cohesion policy programmes.

Thematic Financial Dialogue Networks were established to facilitate the identification of funding sources for the implementation of macro-regional priorities beyond Interreg. In particular, these networks were fruitful for the promotion of mobility actions, offering insights into new funding opportunities and allowing to better assess various funding schemes, especially [Connecting Europe Facility Digital](#).

Funding has also been allocated from regional and national cohesion policy programmes. Programmes with a focus on environment, transport, business development and employment are often of particular interest. Cohesion policy programmes are also used for macro-regional strategy capacity building.

The concept of embedding goes beyond cohesion policy and, for some Action Groups, the most significant contribution comes from programmes managed directly by the Commission. Such programmes contribute notably through the LIFE programme, Horizon Europe, Erasmus, the Connecting Europe Facility and the [Clean Hydrogen Partnership](#).

Compared to previous periods, the process of embedding has been improved in this period. The Strategy organises specific meetings to improve embedding, connecting those responsible for funding with those looking for support.

Experience shows that close ties with managing authorities are essential to allow for an effective embedding process and these authorities have to be engaged as early as possible. Including national coordinators as members or observers in the cohesion policy monitoring committees improves coordination.

However, access to national and regional funding is still a challenge and is more difficult to monitor.

Measuring impact through monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring involves tracking the progress of the Strategy's actions and initiatives. Monitoring helps to assess whether specific targets, indicators, and objectives are being met. The Alpine Strategy Monitoring Matrix is the main monitoring tool agreed by the Executive Board to monitor the progress of the Strategy by monitoring the evolution of the projects with indicators. This allows close follow-up of the implementation of the projects. The Monitoring Matrix combines the list of action plan-level projects with a monitoring of the state of implementation and several categories of outputs.

The Monitoring Matrix is currently under review, so activities with related indicators to be achieved by the end of 2025 have been identified within the Action Group work plans and the Monitoring Matrix is going to be updated to the new goals.

Evaluation involves a deeper assessment of the effectiveness and impact of actions taken under the Strategy. This process evaluates whether the strategy's goals are being achieved, such as fostering sustainable economic growth, improving mobility, and protecting the environment. Evaluation can help inform adjustments to the strategy or refine its implementation.

The Strategy uses specific indicators to measure progress. These can include environmental indicators (such as air and water quality), economic performance (e.g., employment rates or

innovation metrics), and social indicators (quality of life, social inclusion). These indicators allow stakeholders to assess the performance of projects quantitatively.

Stakeholder engagement is key in both monitoring and evaluation. Regular consultation with local authorities, businesses, research institutions, and civil society organisations ensures that the monitoring and evaluation process is participatory and grounded in local realities.

Communicating the Strategy

The creation of a support structure - the Technical Secretariat for the Alpine Strategy in March 2022 and the launch of the Support Alpine Strategy project in January 2023 were important steps for a more coordinated communications approach for the Strategy.

Over the course of two years covered by this report, the Strategy's communication activities focused on enhancing digital presence, greening the communication activities, and youth involvement.

Subsequently, technical audits of the Strategy's website led to a redesign to ensure higher security of data gathered in line with data protection regulations and a more user-friendly interface with multilingual versions.

The deployment of web analytics tools allowed better targeting of communication to various Strategy communities such as Presidencies, the General Assembly, the Executive Board, national coordinators, Action Group Leaders, Action Group members, the Youth Council, and the Technical Secretariat for the Alpine Strategy.

Three main conferences were organised under the Swiss presidency during 2023, on [Circular economy](#) in Fribourg, on [Water as a resource](#) in Scuol and on [Transport and mobility](#) in Lugano, all contributed to the Strategy's communication dissemination messages.

The aim for the coming years is to expand the network of all different types of multipliers, notably engagement with media partners to expand the visibility of the Strategy and to define common communication messages between the Strategy and its funding programmes.

The way forward

The member countries and stakeholders stress the importance of the contribution of the Strategy to the green, digital, and fair transitions. Therefore, future efforts should focus on initiatives that particularly support these transitions and future EU priorities.

The political level has emphasised a commitment to cooperation as a means of fostering trust amongst all stakeholders. While acknowledging the challenges of the action plan revision, they reaffirm the imperative for diligently advancing this effort, as it is an opportunity for the implementation of the Alpine region's shared objectives. They also insist on the shared need for a stronger and more tangible Europe of Regions for the future of its citizens through stronger stakeholder involvement at all levels and political awareness raising.

The Strategy creates synergies with cross-border, transnational and interregional activities in the region and it is important to develop them further in the future.

The long-standing experience of active cooperation with the Alpine Convention, the Interreg Alpine Space programme as well as with other institutions contribute to the sustainability, prosperity and competitiveness of the area and to a joint vision for the Alpine region.

In terms of Strategy governance, it is necessary to ensure the continuity of implemented activities which requires stable structures able to implement cross-sectoral and multi-faceted policy areas. Strengthened policy development is necessary, but also to reinforce the coordination between policies thematically relevant for the Strategy. As to the actual results, many innovative and successful projects and processes have been implemented because of the Strategy. However, to maximise the impact, results of projects would need to be better channelled into and adapted by cross-border, national and regional programmes as well as programmes managed directly by the Commission with the aim of creating project chains.

Cooperation with the other macro-regional strategies already takes place, both at the level of national coordinators and thematic action groups and has increased over time. The work carried out within the four Trio Presidencies framework is considered fruitful and should be further developed. However, there is potential for greater cooperation, in particular with the Danube Strategy on sectoral policies specific for the mountainous regions. Additionally, more strategic cooperation across macro-regional strategies on specific political priorities should be considered.

Furthermore, more involvement of non-governmental organisations and private businesses could be encouraged as they bring a different perspective into the discussion, a broader view and can bring active participation in Strategy actions.

Annexes: Maps of the macro-regional strategies

Annex 1: map of the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region



Annex 2: map of the EU strategy for the Danube region



Annex 3: map of the EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region



Annex 4: map of the EU strategy for the Alpine region

