

Council conclusions on the governance of macro-regional strategies

General Affairs Council meeting
Brussels, 21 October 2014

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

"THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

RECALLING the Council Conclusions of 22 October 2013 on the added value of macro-regional strategies;

RECALLING, in particular, that the Commission was invited to facilitate the discussions on improving the governance of the macro-regional strategies and to report to the Council by the end of 2014, including streamlining the reporting, reviewing and follow-up;

ACKNOWLEDGING the Commission's Report to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies¹ (hereinafter: the Report) delivered on 20 May 2014;

RECALLING that the delivery of results of macro-regional strategies relies on an effective governance model and efficient procedures for the implementation, which take into account the institutional architecture of the participating countries as well as the specificities and competences of their administrative structures;

REFERRING to the concept of macro-regional strategies as an integrated framework endorsed by European Council² and relating to Member States and non-EU countries in the same geographical area in order to address common challenges and to benefit from strengthened cooperation contributing to achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion and RECALLING that in further evolution of macro-regional strategies priority should be given to the issues of coherence and strategic relevance for the macro-regions concerned, providing genuine value-added in relation to horizontal community policies, in particular to the Europe 2020 Strategy and to result-orientation;

RECOGNISING the potential of macro-regional strategies for contributing to the achievement of EU objectives, in particular to support growth and job creation, and for helping to adapt to future challenges facing the EU;

¹ COM (2014) 284 final, of 20.5.2014, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies.

² COM(2009) 248 final, of 10.6.2009, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

STRESSING that macro-regional strategies are of interest to all EU Member States and contribute – *inter alia* - to further promote economic, social and territorial cohesion as well as integration of the internal market, to the stability of certain areas, to foster cooperation between EU and non-EU countries, and to assist participating candidate and potential candidate countries on their path towards the EU;

RECOGNISING that the macro-regional strategies should maintain their focus on the development of EU countries and may contribute to European integration where the participation of non-EU countries constitutes an added value towards achieving the goals of the macro-regional strategies;

ACKNOWLEDGING that macro-regional strategies have to concentrate their actions within a specific geographic area, but without creating new-barriers in the EU and STRESSING the importance of due involvement of all EU Member States and all interested stakeholders on transnational, regional and local level, as appropriate, in the implementation of the Strategies;

STRESSING that macro-regional strategies are based on the principles of no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures and no new EU legislation, and therefore that they call for optimal use of existing financial resources, better use of existing institutions and better implementation of existing legislation;

REITERATING the need for coordination between relevant EU policies as well as between EU and national, and regional and local policies having an impact on territorial cohesion, respecting the principle of subsidiarity;

STRESSING that the macro-regional strategies are not limited to the cohesion policy domain but concern a wide range of policy areas and at the same time TAKING NOTE that the 2014-2020 legislative package for cohesion policy paves the way for better embedding the macro-regional strategies in the programming where appropriate and for coordination with other Union-funded instruments;

RECOGNISING that the existing macro-regional strategies are proving their added value both strategically and politically and RECALLING that the European Council of December 2013 invited the Commission, in cooperation with Member States to elaborate an EU Strategy for the Alpine Region by June 2015;

RECALLING that the implementation of macro-regional strategies showed margins for improvements in the governance and ACKNOWLEDGING that for a better governance it is necessary to ensure a stronger political leadership and decision making as well as a greater clarity in the organization of the work;

WELCOMING the indications contained in the Report based on the experience gained from the existing macro-regional strategies and, in particular, the lessons learned from the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, notably the need to focus on a limited number of challenges and opportunities, to strengthen institutional and administrative capacity, and to secure ownership, commitment and leadership from participating countries as well as ACKNOWLEDGING that the Report does not intend to present a pre-defined model of governance but provides options and recommendations to be taken into account in the context of reference;

ACKNOWLEDGING that governance involves three levels: (i) political leadership and ownership, (ii) coordination and (iii) implementation and that these levels are inter-related, in particular political leadership and ownership being a pre-requisite for effective coordination and implementation and ACKNOWLEDGING that these levels should be strengthened in order to ensure that the implementation of the strategies brings clear impact and better results.

General principles

UNDERLINES that governance is a shared process which describes how and by whom the strategies are implemented, joint actions initiated and financed and which involves the European Commission and the other European Institutions, where appropriate, the Member States and, where appropriate, the participating non-EU countries at both political and administrative level, the stakeholders, relevant key implementers (e.g. National Coordinators/National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators and Pillar Coordinators) and other implementers at all levels.

STRESSES that governance is not a "one size fits all" model and RECOMMENDS that the governance of macro-regional strategies should build on the experience and practice of existing strategies but be adapted to the specificities of the strategies and of the institutional and administrative structure of the countries participating in a macro-regional strategy, with a proportionate and flexible approach, also open to further developments;

STRESSES that governance and the related working method should avoid creating unnecessary administrative burdens and should aim at a streamlined process;

CALLS on the Commission to refrain from setting up additional EU formal structures and ENCOURAGES the Commission and the Member States to better exploit and enhance the existing ones;

RECOGNISING that the approach may also extend to non-EU countries, INVITES the Commission and Member States to ensure where appropriate their full engagement at the adequate political levels;

STRESSES that the effectiveness of the macro-regional strategies to deliver tangible results relies on both the Commission and the participating countries and requires a multilevel governance with the involvement of European and national Parliaments, including regional governments, in order to ensure an adequate debate at EU level;

INVITES the Commission to regularly report - throughout the implementation process of the macro-regional strategies, including its monitoring and the evaluations of its results - to the Council through its relevant preparatory bodies and to the other EU Institutions, in particular the European Parliament, as well as to the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, on progress made towards implementation of the macro-regional strategies, including achievements of targets and relevant milestones, as well as on possible developments of the macro-regional strategies. To this end INVITES the Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, to support the development of adequate monitoring and evaluation tools.

Political leadership and ownership

UNDERLINES the importance of responsibility and leadership of the Commission and INVITES the Commission to continue playing a leading role in strategic coordination of all key delivery stages of the macro-regional strategies, where its involvement brings a clear added-value, in partnership with the Member States and in accordance with the subsidiarity principle;

CALLS on the Commission to ensure that the governance of the macro-regional strategies is coherent and in line with the overall implementation of EU policies;

UNDERLINES the role of relevant ministries of the Member States, in accordance with Member States institutional and legal framework, in implementing the macro-regional strategies and their responsibility for driving progress in their thematic areas and that, when needed, they should meet for discussing and agreeing on strategic issues related to the macro-regional strategies;

INVITES the Member States to reinforce the political leadership and ownership of the macro-regional strategies and UNDERLINES the importance of Member States' readiness to maintain their political commitment in the long term and translate it into institutional and administrative support in order to ensure effective delivery of the macro-regional strategies, in particular by clearly identifying institutional and administrative responsibilities in relation to the themes and actions covered by the strategies, to be implemented;

INVITES the Member States to ensure that political guidance from their political representatives is given for the operational level in order to provide overall direction, set priorities and take decisions and that those responsible for embedding the implementation of the macro-regional strategies within the existing plans and programmes - taking into consideration all regulatory provisions of the funding programmes - as well as for evaluating progress, guiding implementation and seeking breakthroughs, are formally recognised on both trans-national and national level when stalemates and deadlocks occur, in order to ensure an effective and systemic linkage between the political level and coordination and implementation.

INVITES:

1. the Commission and the Member States to strengthen policy-level discussions by reinforcing the strategic role of the High Level Group and the National Contact Points/National Coordinators to ensure strong leadership and ownership;
2. the Commission and the participating Member States to better use the existing Annual *Fora*, organised with the active involvement of the Commission, as an important occasions where progress of implementation of macro regional strategies is discussed and recommendations to guide decision-making are issued, in accordance with the principles of transparency and broad participation, and together with all relevant stakeholders;
3. the Commission and the Member States to liaise with and to ensure the involvement of the European and national Parliaments, and as appropriate the regional and local political level;
4. the Commission and the Member States to reflect on better involvement of relevant Council formations, to ensure that an adequate debate on macro-regional strategies takes place as appropriate;
5. the Commission and the Member States to bear in mind the role of relevant ministries, in accordance with Member States institutional and legal framework, and their responsibility for driving progress in their thematic areas;
6. all actors involved to strengthen elements of multilevel governance as a major feature of macro-regional strategies and to better take into account the important contributions of all levels of society concerning macro regional strategies.

Coordination

INVITES:

1. the Commission to keep playing a key role in providing strategic coordination of the macro-regional strategies where its involvement brings a clear added-value;
2. the Commission and the Member States to ensure that the political dimension and the decisions taken are implemented through a strong and effective coordination, recognised by the relevant authorities and including cross-policy and cross-sectoral coordination along with coordination with non-EU countries of the macro-regional strategies, where non-EU countries are involved;
3. the Member States to provide with management resources to ensure coordination, operational guidance and cooperation with relevant macro-regional organisations; to this aim to set out a clear breakdown of competencies and tasks of their authorities at both national and macro-regional level;

4. the Member States to empower the relevant key implementers (e.g. National Coordinators/National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators and Pillar Coordinators) towards a more efficient management, coordination and monitoring of the relevant macro regional strategy as a whole and to reinforce their role in bringing together national/regional/local stakeholders as well as civil society to facilitate the implementation;
5. the High Level Group to ensure coordination among the macro-regional strategies to evaluate the progress of their implementation and provide with strategic guidance;
6. the Commission and the Member States to take the macro-regional strategies into account in relevant policy initiatives and programmes, both under its direct management, and under shared management, to ensure the added value of the macro-regional strategies;
7. the Commission to ensure regular coordination among all its relevant Directorates-general and Services;
8. the Commission and the Member States concerned to encourage their authorities responsible for the management of different financing instruments to seek to ensure where appropriate mobilisation of Union funding for macro-regional strategies in line with the needs of the programme area identified by the Member States, and ensure, as appropriate, that an adequate dialogue between those authorities and the relevant key implementers (e.g. National Coordinators/National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators and Pillar Coordinators) of the macro-regional strategy takes place;
9. the Commission and the Member States to ensure where appropriate the coordination with the Partnership Agreements and the programmes co-financed by the ESI Funds and to specify, where appropriate, subject to the needs of the programme area as identified by the Member States, the contribution of the planned interventions under the programme to relevant macro-regional strategies, and to this aim to fully explore the concrete application of the provisions for the ESI Funds in the framework of the macro-regional strategies' implementation;
10. the Member States to better exploit the potentials in the coordination role of the transnational cooperation programmes, where relevant;
11. the Commission and the Member States to ensure that adequate coordination is established among macro-regional strategies, in particular to ensure that projects and partnerships can be developed across macro-regional strategies as appropriate and where relevant, also reflecting on whether and how the role of INTERACT could be enhanced.

Implementation

INVITES:

1. the Commission to provide expertise and to actively facilitate the implementation of the agreed actions and the coordination of existing EU funds and instruments, to cooperate closely with the relevant existing institutions, regional organisations, networks and partners, with a view to improving regional coherence and synergy, and to reinforce the cooperation with the financial institutions necessary for the realisation and funding of the macro-regional strategy as well as to safeguard the involvement of stakeholders concerned at EU level;
2. the Commission and the Member States where appropriate to ensure adequate contribution of planned interventions to the macro-regional strategies, subject to the needs of the programme areas as identified by the Member States. This implies the need to strengthen project promoters skills and building up administrative capacities to better prepare, design and implement projects;

3. the Member States to make effective use of relevant key implementers (e.g. National Coordinators/National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators and Pillar Coordinators) and steering groups involved operationally in the frameworks of the pillars and/or priority areas to drive implementation;
4. the Commission and the Member States to adequately support the relevant key implementers (e.g. National Coordinators/National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators and Pillar Coordinators) to fulfill their tasks;
5. the Commission and the Member States to improve publicity and communication to raise awareness on the objectives and opportunities of the strategies;
6. the Commission and the Member States to fully explore the concrete application of the provisions for – *inter alia* - the ESI Funds, including those related to financing operations outside programme area.

ENCOURAGES:

1. the Member States to reflect on appropriate ways to engage the private sector;
2. the Member States and other relevant authorities concerned to embed the objectives of the macro-regional strategies into the programming documents of the new 2014-2020 programming period in a coordinated way in line with the needs of the programme area identified by the Member States and taking into account possibilities foreseen in the Common Strategic Framework for 2014–2020 and specific mechanisms such as giving priority in the selection process to the operations deriving from these strategies or organising specific calls for them in accordance with transparent, pertinent and concrete selection criteria set up by the competent management body;
3. the Member States to support relevant key implementers (e.g. National Coordinators/National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators and Pillar Coordinators) of the relevant macro-regional strategy, also using the institutional and capacity-building support of transnational programmes 2014-2020 upon decision of related managing authorities and monitoring committees.

CALLS ON:

1. the Commission and the Member States to ensure appropriate monitoring, reporting and evaluation, based on realistic indicators and targets;
2. the Commission and the Member States to actively support the multi-level governance approach recognizing the potential substantial contribution from all levels of society in implementing the macro-regional strategies;
3. the Member States to encourage a strong involvement of civil society and consultative networks or platforms in the project activities, taking in consideration the importance of partners in ensuring good quality projects.

INVITES the Member States, Commission and other interested stakeholders to take into account these Conclusions while implementing the existing macro-regional strategies and when preparing the future ones."