THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES – BETWEEN THE STEADFAST COMMITMENT OF PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES AND AN *AD HOC* APPROACH

*Dr. sc. Ivan Zeko-Pivač**

UDK 338.2:061.1(4)EU
https://doi.org/10.30925/zpfsr.43.1.12
Ur.: 7. studenoga 2021.
Pr.: 13. ožujka 2022.
Pregledni rad

Summary

The European Union macro-regional strategies represent a policy framework that aims to enable EU Member States and third countries sharing common interests to better coordinate their potentials in order to make the best possible use of available opportunities. This paper looks into the specificities of four EU macro-regional strategies covering 19 European Union Member States and nine non-EU countries. Given the challenging situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it also considers the future perspectives of EU macro-regional strategies as well as their adaptability to new circumstances. More specifically, it focuses on intergovernmental initiatives and their implementation, underlying the importance of the application of the principle of subsidiarity. In addition, the aim of the paper is to provide a critical overview of the subject by highlighting two pivotal elements. First, it assesses whether the EU macro-regional strategies could be genuinely successful, given the fact that they do not have their separate allocation but use the existing funding instead. Second, it explores the ability of the EU macro-regional strategies to bridge wider EU-level policies on the one hand and local policies on the other. Finally, the idea of the paper is to offer an overview of the state of affairs when macro-regions are concerned.

Keywords*: EU macro-regional strategies; European Union; Cohesion Policy.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Defined as a policy framework, the EU macro-regional strategies appear to be a tool which allows countries located in the same region to tackle its specificities by maximising their potentials. By definition, their cooperation leads to a more

* Ivan Zeko-Pivač, Ph.D., Minister Counsellor at the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union, Brussels Ivan.Zeko-Pivac@mvep.hr. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6013-6717.

efficient use of existing resources in areas of common interest, such as environmental protection or internal market, followed by maximisation of opportunities that would be grasped less often if each country acted independently.[1] A 'macro-region' refers to an area that includes a territory encompassing a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges. Such regions are socially construed and demarcated by flexible or even vague boundaries.[2]

For the fact that the EU macro-regional strategies are usually not explicitly mentioned in most documents of relevance for territorial development,[3] it is often difficult to establish a firm legislative basis for their further development. Financed by the European Structural and Investment Funds,[4] the EU macro-regional strategies focus primarily on cohesion and coherence, notions intrinsically related to the EU's main investment policy – Cohesion Policy.[5]

Regions are a key element of Cohesion Policy. Academic discussions have already considered the importance of regions, with an emphasis on regionalism, "a distinct political ideology that tries to make regions the centre of political and social construction of a particular society".[6]

EU Cohesion Policy aims to reduce structural disparities between regions "by fostering balanced development throughout the EU and promoting real equal opportunities for all".[7] However, there is no consensus on the capability of Cohesion

1 European Commission Publication, *Factsheet – What is an EU macro-regional strategy?* (Brussels: Regional and Urban Policy, Publication Office, European Union, 2017), 1.

2 Stefan Gänzle and Kristine Kern, "Macro-regionalization' and Macro-regional Strategies in the European Union: Towards a New Form of European Governance?", in: *A 'macro-regional' Europe in the making, Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Evidence,* Stefan Gänzle and Kristine Kern (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2016), 3-4.

3 Alexandre Dubois *et al.*, *EU macro-regions and macro-regional strategies – A scoping study* (Stockholm: Nordregio, 2009), 9.

4 European Commission Publication, *Factsheet – What is an EU macro-regional strategy?*, 1. In the financial period 2014-2020, five European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) channelled over half of the EU funding. The funds are jointly managed by the European Commission and EU Member States, and involve European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Social Fund (ESF), European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF). All the said funds share a common goal of investing in jobs and creating a sustainable and healthy European economy and environment. See more: *European Commission, European Structural and Investment Funds*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes/overview-funding-programmes/european-structural-and-investment-funds_en, accessed on 1 October 2021.

5 Cohesion Policy has long been an important pillar of the European Union and it is highly visible because it comprises one-third of its budget. The governance of Cohesion Policy is unique since it is managed through the so-called 'shared management' of EU Member States with the European Commission, resulting in numerous projects across the European Union. See more: Ugo Fratesi and Fiona G. Wishlade, "The impact of European Cohesion Policy in different contexts", *Regional Studies* 51, No. 6 (2017): 818.

6 Vedran Đulabić and Dario Čepo, "Regionalism and Sub-Regional Representation: A Guide to the County Transformation of Croatia", *Hrvatska komparativna i javna uprava: časopis za teoriju i praksu javne uprave* 17, No. 4 (2017): 544.

7 Nataša Zrilić and Davor Širola, "Regional development through European Economic Interest

Policy to promote economic growth and convergence of European regions, to reduce their economic gaps and disparities, to promote their overall harmonious development or to strengthen their economic, social or territorial cohesion. Different studies reach different conclusions.[8] For example, bearing in mind the difficult times facing the EU, the Cohesion Policy "remained the most important sign and instrument of European solidarity that became even more necessary in times of crisis. The main recipient countries asked for more European assistance and solidarity and their expectations grew, particularly in the crisis countries. On the other hand, net-paying countries argued for a more efficient use of European funds to promote growth and jobs and denied to increase their payments to the EU budget. They argued that for many decades the policy could not achieve the objective to reduce divergence."[9] Nevertheless, understanding the success of Cohesion Policy could be referred as a subjective question, as well as the question of the success of EU macro-regional strategies.

In a nutshell, defining European regions is difficult to such an extent that most scholarly writings on regionalism avoid offering any precise interpretation thereof.[10] There are at least three different definitions of a 'region', which could be identified in literature – a statistical, administrative and affective one.[11]

The EU macro-regional strategies support the overall European Union's promotion of a positive self-concept through three main types of self-images: the image of cosmopolitan Europe, civilian power and normative power.[12] They were launched as a political and governance experiment,[13] starting in 2009 with the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, and they are referred to as a new mode of territorial governance.[14] In the following years, three more EU macro-regional strategies

Grouping (EEIG)", *International Journal Vallis Aurea* 1, No. 2 (2015): 114.

8 Riccardo Crescenzi and Mara Giua, *Leveraging complementarities for evidence-based policy learning* in John, Bachtler, Peter Berkowitz, Sally Hardy and Tatjana Muravska, *EU Cohesion Policy, Reassessing Performance and Direction* (Oxon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 21.

9 Peter Becker, "The reform of European cohesion policy or how to couple the streams successfully", *Journal of European Integration* 41, No. 2 (2019): 155

10 Roger Scully and Richard Wyn Jones, *Europe, Regions and European Regionalism* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2010.), 6.

11 Scully and Wyn Jones, *Europe, Regions and European Regionalism*, 5. Scully and Wyn Jones explain that those three different definitions of a 'region' are identifiable in the theory and practice of contemporary European politics and often tangentially interrelated. They represent a basis for the presentation of European statistical data.

12 Elżbieta Stadtmüller and Klaus Bachmann, *The EUs Shifting Borders, Theoretical approaches and policy implications in the new neighbourhood* (Wiltshire: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 20. Stadtmüller and Bachmann emphasize that through these images, the European Union projects an image of superiority.

13 European Commission, *Study on Macroregional Strategies and their links with Cohesion Policy, Final Report* (Brussels: Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, Directorate D – European Territorial Cooperation, Macro-regions, Interreg and Programme Implementation I Unit D.1 – Macro-regions, Transnational, Interregional Cooperation, IPA, Enlargement, 2017), 10.

14 Stefanie Dühr, *Baltic Sea, Danube and Macro- Regional Strategies: A Model for Transnational Cooperation in the EU?* (Berlin: Institute Jaques Delors, 2011), 5.

ensued – the EU Strategy for the Danube Region in 2010, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region in 2014 and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region in 2015.[15] Their guiding principle could be generally outlined as "no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures, no new EU legislation while relying on smart coordinated governance approach and synergy effects: better implementation of existing legislation, optimal use of existing financial sources and better use of existing institutions"[16] The EU macro-regional strategies are structured to provide added value to the EU both strategically and politically; first, by providing a framework for enhanced cooperation between participating countries in areas of common interest and in addressing their common challenges; second, by mobilising a variety of available financial sources and relevant stakeholders towards improved policy development and implementation of different policies; third, by improving existing cooperation mechanisms and networks; and fourth, by contributing to developing and improving access to financing new high quality projects and promoting successful ones.[17]

In the EU macro-regional strategies, particular attention is paid to a horizontal approach in providing assistance to various types of regional programmes and projects. More precisely, a horizontal approach means moving from traditional vertical to horizontal coordination where various cooperation networks, councils and associations are used.[18] A horizontal approach is important because it ensures allocation of funds to projects that contribute to a wide range of achievements and encourage diversity.[19]

2 THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE EU MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES – COOPERATION OF THE MEMBER STATES AND NON-EU COUNTRIES

Membership structure varies between strategies. The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) mostly revolves, as its name suggests, around the basin of the Baltic Sea, including the hinterland.[20] It comprises 12 participating countries: eight EU Member States (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden) and four Neighbouring Countries (Belarus, Iceland, Norway and Russia).[21] The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) concentrates on

15 European Commission Publication, *Factsheet – What is an EU macro-regional strategy?*, 1.

16 Council of the European Union, Council conclusions of 22 October 2013 on added value of macro-regional strategies, General Affairs Council meeting Luxembourg, 2.

17 Council of the European Union, Council conclusions of 22 October 2013 on added value of macro-regional strategies, 2-3.

18 Marek Furmankiewicz, Krzysztof Janc and Áine Macken-Walsh, "Implementation of the EU LEADER programme at member-state level: Written and unwritten rules of local project selection in rural Poland", *Journal of Rural Studies* No. 86 (2021): 357.

19 Andrew Evans, *EU Regional Policy* (Richmond: Richmond Law &Tax, 2005), 252.

20 European Commission, *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region*, accessed on 2 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/baltic-sea/.

21 European Commission, *EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region*.

the basin of the Danube River. Due to a large number of participating countries – 14 EU Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, parts of Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia), three Accession Countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) and two Neighbouring Countries (Moldova and parts of Ukraine), the Strategy is currently the largest and most diverse EU macro-regional strategy.[22] Geographically, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) is defined by the Adriatic and Ionian Seas basin. While encompassing nine countries: four EU Member States (Croatia, Greece, Italy and Slovenia) and five Accession Countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia),[23] it is the only strategy that has more non-EU members (5) than EU Member States (4), with San Marino being currently on the way to become the tenth participating country. The prevailing characteristic of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region refers to the maritime and marine macro-regional objective of protecting the Adriatic and Ionian seas and their ecosystems from pollution.[24] Finally, the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) relies on seven members – Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and Switzerland.[25]

Cumulatively, the areas where EU macro-regional strategies are implemented have a total population of over 350 million (EUSBSR – 85 million; EUSDR – 115 million; EUSAIR – 70 million; and EUSALP – 80 million). Bearing in mind that the membership of some countries spans various EU macro-regional strategies, the figure should not be taken as final since the actual number of Europeans involved in macro-regional projects is slightly smaller.[26]

The economic cooperation between participating countries "can be attributed mainly to foreign trade and foreign direct investment".[27] The basic motive for such cooperation lies in the advantages secured by forming "free-trade areas or custom unions covering several countries or parts thereof".[28]

Since the very beginning, the borders of participating countries have been "perceived as both obstacles and opportunities where the European project and European integration are concerned".[29] Even though it was expected that the creation of an EU common market would annulate the obstacles inherent to state borders, certain physical barriers, such as "a lack of roads, bridges or railway connections,

22 European Commission, *EU Strategy for the Danube Region*, accessed on 4 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/danube/.

23 European Commission, *EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region*, accessed on 3 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/adriatic-ionian/.

24 Loredana Giani, *Connecting the Region and EUSAIR* in Marina D'Orsogna, *EUSAIR Strategy, Multilevel Governance and Territorial Cooperation* (Napoli: Editoriale Scientifica, 2016), 93.

25 European Commission, *The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region*, accessed on 5 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/alpine/.

26 European Commission, *Macro-regional strategies*, accessed on 1 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/.

27 Jacek Zaucha *et al.*, "EU macro-regional strategies for the Baltic Sea Region after 2020. A nutshell of beauty and possibilities", *Europa XXI* 38 (2020): 56.

28 Zaucha *et al.*, *EU macro-regional strategies*, 56.

29 Zaucha *et al.*, *EU macro-regional strategies*, 52.

underdevelopment of certain peripheral border regions and mentality-related or cultural differences preventing more efficient pooling of the resources present on either side", still represent serious aggravating factors. In addition, the full potential of development synergies in cross-border regions remain underused.[30]

3 THE FUTURE PERSPECTIVES OF THE EU MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES AND THEIR ADAPTABILITY TO NEW CIRCUMSTANCES FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

On 23 September 2020, the European Commission published its Report 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.[31] This is the latest, third report on the state of play of the EU macro-regional strategies, covering the period from mid-2018 to mid-2020.[32] The Report underlines the state of play and overall progress made regarding the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies and considers the way forward. It is complemented by a staff working document offering more details on every EU macro-regional strategy.[33] Today, the EU macro-regional strategies represent a powerful tool that support economic, social and territorial development and integration where a particular emphasize is placed on good relations with neighbouring countries. They are "an integral part of the EU territorial cooperation toolbox" and their potential remains to be fully realized. However, in order to keep abreast with new priorities and to continue meeting challenges, they need to be regularly updated. A balance needs to be achieved between emerging new priorities and continuity of work with tangible results.[34] The peculiarity of the Report relates to its comprehensiveness as the EU macro-regional strategies are put in the wider context of the unprecedented health crisis caused by the coronavirus.

30 Zaucha *et al.*, *EU macro-regional strategies*, 56.

31 European Commission, Third report 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 (2020) 578 final, Brussels, 23.9.2020.

32 European Commission, *Third report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, 1. Those reports are prepared every two years, from the end of 2016 onwards*. Their purpose was first specified in the 2015 Council conclusions on the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) as *"describing the progress made towards the implementation of all macro-regional strategies, presenting recommendations on possible developments of the Strategies and their Action Plans and/or on how to improve or optimise their implementation, taking into account the particularities of the different strategies".* European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) - Council conclusions, 14613/15, 27 November 2015, Brussels, 12.

33 European Commission, *Third report 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*, 3.

34 European Commission, *Third report 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*, 9.

Speaking of the first two reports, published in 2016 and 2019, it is possible to see certain concrete conclusions. In the first report, "an assessment of the state of implementation of the current strategies" was made while main achieved results were taken into account as well. Common cross-cutting questions related to all four strategies were addressed, "regardless of their degree of maturity (for example policy-making and planning, governance, monitoring and evaluation, funding and communication)." As the main conclusion, it was drawn that the EU macro-regional strategies have not yet shown their full potential where certain challenges still remain unanswered. "Greater ownership and responsibility need to be retained by the Member States who initiated the strategies". At the same time, special emphasis was identified as crucial when it comes to the effectiveness of governance systems needs that were supposed to be improved, and relevant existing funding sources (on the EU, regional and national level) that needed to be better coordinated.[35] In the second report, the cross-cutting issues (policy-making and planning, administrative capacity, governance, monitoring, access to funding as well as communication) were described as improving when it comes to the results. "In addition, some progress has been made on thematic priorities with a number of implemented projects across the EU macro-regional strategies (environment, climate change, research, innovation, and economic development)." Furthermore, the report stressed that the key implementers "should continue to improve their governance mechanism by strengthening synergies among all regional and local actors."[36]

The EU macro-regional strategies are highly relevant in terms of fulfilling the EU priorities for 2019-2024, especially those closely interlinked with the European Green Deal.[37] Although there are certain aggravating circumstances in reaching those objectives, such as the lack of a separate allocation for EU macro-regional strategies,[38] the European Commission regards them as an extremely useful platform for coordination "across countries and among funds, sectors, governance levels and stakeholders". However, occasionally, even the European Commission expresses criticism towards them. For example, while acknowledging the importance of the EU macro-regional strategies, the European Commission emphasised that a coordinated action and efficiency improvements in the use of shared available resources are

35 First report 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(2016) 805 final, Brussels, 16.12.2016.

36 Second report 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(2019) 21 final, Brussels, 29.1.2019.

37 European Commission, *Third report 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*, 2.

38 Since the EU macro-regional strategies do not include direct allocation, there are, according to Sielker, "three key drivers that make macro-regions a promising framework to help overcome inefficiencies of existing frameworks are: first, fuzziness, second, frameworks meeting different interests alongside and third, improved access to EU budgets." Franziska Sielker, *New approaches in European governance? Perspectives of stakeholders in the Danube macro-region* (Oxon: Routledge Taylor&Francis Group, 2016), 93.

needed in order to maximize opportunities and make full use of the EU macro-regional strategies in whole.[39] On the other hand, there have been a number of improvements in their implementation since they were formulated. With respect to the previous Report, light should be shed on the following points of progress – (1) the action plan has been revised both in the Danube and the Baltic strategy, (2) the Republic of North Macedonia has joined the Adriatic-Ionian strategy and (3) the 'embedding' process is ongoing in all EU macro-regional strategies as a way of aligning the relevant priorities of EU funding programmes 2021-2027 with the EU macro-regional strategies.[40] The need for further strengthening of the EU macro-regional strategies became even more pronounced at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has proved that effective cooperation between countries is essential for European well-being.

4 THE APPROACH OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TOWARDS THE EU MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES – KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK!

On 2 December 2020, following the European Commission's Report of 23 September 2020, the Council of the European Union adopted its conclusions on the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies.[41] In a relatively short document, all the EU Member States unanimously agreed that the process of implementation is going in the right direction. In a nutshell, the Council welcomed the deliberations of the European Commission, particularly those accentuating the importance of the embedding process of the EU macro-regional strategies in the current financial period 2021-2027 and its facilitation. The conclusions themselves cannot be labelled as revolutionary. Yet, they seem to be an important contribution of the Council to the overall recognition of the relevance of EU macro-regional strategies. More concrete conclusions are expected in the next, fourth report, which should provide for details on the success of the embedding process by 2022.[42] The need to promote this process has been continuously reiterated by both all the members of the EU macro-regional strategies and the Council of the European Union. Another area that has been deemed by the Council as highly critical for triggering the involvement of the EU macro-regional strategies is the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as EU macro-regional strategies should be characterised by synergies necessary to overcome such emergencies. In general, the recipe for the future success of the EU

39 Sielker, *New approaches in European governance?*, 93.

40 Second report 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(2019) 21 final, Brussels, 29.1.2019.

41 Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, 13424/10, 3 December 2020, Brussels. The Council conclusions on the implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies are adopted on the basis of previously published European Commission's reports and the Council conclusions in question are the third in a row.

42 Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, 1.

macro-regional strategies seems simple – participating countries or regions should "actively explore synergies, encourage complementarities and avoid overlap with other relevant regional initiatives and sea-basin strategies".[43] In their 2021-2027 EU national and regional programmes, participating countries will be granted a unique opportunity to promote the relevant priorities of the EU macro-regional strategies. The embedding process is expected to increase programme impacts by providing better coordination and particular financial means.[44] Similarly to reporting of the European Commission, the Member States at the Council also take an active role in shaping EU macro-regional policies with their conclusions. Currently, there is a lot of room for improvement of the process by raising the participating countries' awareness of the importance of their proactive approach and substantial contribution to middle to long term recovery alongside with stronger political ownership. Ultimately, the EU macro-regional strategies hold a potential to influence other EU policies, such as environmental policy,[45] and this witnesses their influential character.

5 THE ABILITY OF THE EU MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGES – QUO VADIS*?*

One of the most topical questions imposed while assessing the future perspectives of the EU macro-regional strategies is how attractive they appear to potential new members. Some of them have been in the same line-up since their inception, some have evolved over time and some continue to attract new members. The first EU macro-regional strategy, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, has had the same membership since it was created in 2009. Although there has been no change in its membership, the Strategy has been being continuously improved through its Action Plans, most recently in February 2021 when the main focus was put on boosting resilience and recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.[46] Among the main ideas embedded in the pledge for a positive future are the improvement of transnational cooperation, the involvement of young people in the management process and the simplification of coordination and control, which could be achieved by reducing the total number of planned actions from 73 to 44, structured in 14 policy areas. The goal of these measures is establishing a stable and strong region that should provide necessary preconditions for efficient and effective recovery after the crisis.[47] One of the crucial elements needed in this process is, in Andersson's words, "that the region possesses a

43 Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, 7.

44 Gabriela Marchis, "EU Macro-Regional Strategies – A Great Solution for a Better Future", *Journal of Danubian Studies and Research* 11, No. 2 (2021): 172.

45 Stefan Gänzle, "Macro-regional strategies of the European Union, Russia and multilevel governance in northern Europe", *Journal of Baltic Studies* 48, No. 4 (2017): 400.

46 European Commission*, New Action plan of the EUSBSR macro-regional strategy for boosting resilience and recovery in the Baltic Sea Region*, accessed on 2 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/mex_21_662#6.

47 European Commission*, New Action plan of the EUSBSR macro-regional strategy.*

common identity to some degree or have strong joint interests".[48]

On the other hand, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region has no additional space for expansion as it covers the participants along the Danube River, which is the longest river in the EU and the world's most international river, sometimes referred to as a natural field of transnational cooperation. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region also has its Action Plan, which determines the direction of the Strategy – unlocking the full potential of the Danube Region in whole. More precisely, the aim of the Strategy is depicted in the Action Plan as "building networks, offering mutual learning, striving for harmonisation, aligning policies, building capacities, strengthening civil society and voluntary service, and more". The implementation of these activities could be achieved with scant resources but with significant final impact.[49] In the focus of the Strategy are four principal pillars: Blue Growth, Connecting the Region, Environmental Quality and Sustainable Tourism. Every pillar is intertwined with a wide spectrum of policies and affects other Strategy's objectives.[50]

On 11 May 2021, representatives of the Government of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia responded positively to the request of the Republic of San Marino to become the tenth participating country of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region by signing the so-called Izola Declaration.[51] The next phase of the process pertains to the letter of 15 June 2021, in which the Member States appealed to the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union to undertake necessary steps to include the Republic of San Marino into the Strategy. Since the Portuguese Presidency replied positively, the Member States were invited to reveal their position at the meeting of the Structural Measures and Outermost Regions Working Party of the Council of the European Union on 30 September 2021. The Member States unanimously supported the inclusion of the Republic of San Marino into the Strategy.[52] The attractiveness of the Strategy has been additionally emphasised by the recent Cypriot announcement of intention to become a member thereof. However, the formal steps have not been

48 Marcus Andersson, "Region branding: The case of the Baltic Sea Region", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 3 (2007): 120.

49 European Commission, Commission staff working document, Action Plan replacing Staff Working Document accompanying the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, European Union's Strategy for Danube Region, Brussels, 6.4.2020 SWD (2020) 59 final, 2.

50 See more*:* European Commission*, EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region*, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/adriatic-ionian/#1, 10 October 2021.

51 Full text of the *Izola declaration* available at https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Izola-Declaration-11-May-2021.pdf, accessed on 9 October 2021. See more: Council of the European Union, Working Paper WK 11076/2021 INIT, Application to join the macro-regional strategy for the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), 27 September 2021, Brussels.

52 Council of the European Union, Working Paper WK 11076/2021 INIT. This also represents internal information of the Structural Measures and Outermost Regions Working Party of which the author is a member.

taken yet.

Finally, the membership of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region has not undergone any changes since the proclamation of the Strategy which encompasses one of the richest areas in the world – Alpine states. However, significant economic differences between the territories still exist, requiring a more pronounced common response.[53]

6 IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

The EU macro-regional strategies have a significant potential. In theory, their role is by no means questionable. All the four EU macro-regional strategies bear great relevance for the citizens and economies of the respected territories. A unique approach to their management is of utmost importance. While the undertaken activities pertaining to efficiency improvement and benefits can be discussed, the utility of the EU macro-regional strategies remains unchallenged. One of the limiting factors for the four EU macro-regional strategies is their dependency on national planning or maximizing available potential at each Member State's level, so it could be argued that the EU macro-regional strategies are as strong as their weakest component.

The EU macro-regional strategies have proved to be particularly relevant at the time of the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. In order to alleviate the negative socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Union has introduced a number of financial contributions, worth billions of euros,[54] to help its Member States deal with pressing health, economic and social needs. In this extremely specific situation, when time is a critical factor, the EU macro-regional strategies have turned out to be an important cog in the wheel in the EU's overall *ad hoc* response to the pandemic.

Given their short history (ranging from 12 to 6 years), it is quite difficult to assess the full potential of the EU macro-regional strategies. Still, some lessons have been learned and may be used as future guidance. For example, the unprecedented crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that emergencies usually cannot be addressed by a single country alone to deal effectively with economic, fiscal or social consequences. Furthermore, the efforts of the European Union to create innovative tools with plentiful financial means represent a substantial chance for shaping the

53 European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document, *Action Plan Accompanying the document 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 Alpine Region*, Brussels, 28.7.2015. SWD (2020) 59 final, 4.

54 The European Commission launched two packages of measures in April 2020 – the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII) and the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus (CRII+), both swiftly endorsed by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, which led to a release of more than 21 billion euros. On 27 May 2020, they were supplemented by the REACT-EU package, on the basis of which 34 of the total planned 50 billion euros have been approved so far. See more*: Cohesion policy against coronavirus*, accessed on 20 October 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/coronavirus-response/.

future of the European Union. In both cases, the EU macro-regional strategies should be seen as an opportunity to connect and promote economic, social and territorial cohesion.

For the fact that the EU macro-strategies are not tangible nor have a permanent allocation, their character is mystified and, to a certain extent, abstract. Nevertheless, due to their potential in the perplexing world full of challenges, they could, without any doubt, be described as a pledge for future. Yet, the individual approach of participating countries to obstacles is often marked out as a disruptive factor.

The concept of the EU macro-regional strategies could be denoted as inspiring. However, like in real life, in order to produce results, inspiration needs to be coupled with tools and structure. The EU macro-regional strategies are best described by the triple negation rule – there is (1) no new and additional allocation, (2) no new structure and (3) no new legislation. This in practice means that the EU macro-regional strategies must be improved within their existing capacities, so strong political commitment and clear ambition are decisive for their success. By now, the EU macro-regional strategies have swimmingly managed to bring together different stakeholders and unite them around common interests. It is still uncertain whether some of the elements of the triple negation approach will be modified to make the EU macro-regional strategies more effective and sustainable in the future. Also, national administrations often have to deal with demanding tasks and the implementation of additional activities without the triple negation approach could be highly questionable.

The EU macro-regional strategies are dependent on adequate sources of finance, which are secured through various funding schemes such as particular funds and initiatives. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic is still in full swing, so the burden remains large-scaled and the danger of deepening regional disparities is much present, particularly in terms of creating synergies for growth and employment in the regions. Time will show whether the lessons learned are good enough or some new unprecedented situations will write a new page in history.

Finally, in order to exploit the full potential of the EU macro-regional strategies to the benefit of EU citizens, their connection with Cohesion Policy must be additionally expanded and strengthened, which should then result in the targeting strategic areas and coordination with EU policies and instruments.

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Ivan Zeko-Pivač*

Sažetak

ULOGA MAKROREGIONALNIH STRATEGIJA EUROPSKE UNIJE – IZMEĐU ČVRSTE OBVEZE ZEMALJA SUDIONICA I *AD HOC* PRISTUPA

Makroregionalne strategije Europske unije okvir su politike koji ima za cilj omogućiti državama članicama EU-a i trećim zemljama, koje dijele zajedničke interese, da bolje koordiniraju svoje potencijale kako bi na najbolji način iskoristile dostupne mogućnosti. Ovaj rad razmatra specifičnosti četiriju makroregionalnih strategija EU-a koje pokrivaju 19 država članica i devet zemalja koje nisu članice EU-a. S obzirom na izazovnu situaciju uzrokovanu pandemijom bolesti COVID-19, razmatraju se i buduće perspektive makroregionalnih strategija EU-a kao i njihova prilagodljivost novim okolnostima. Točnije, usredotočuje se na međuvladine inicijative i njihovu provedbu, što je temelj primjene načela supsidijarnosti. Uz to, cilj je rada dati kritički presjek teme naglašavajući dva ključna elementa. Prvo, procjenjuje se mogu li makroregionalne strategije EU-a biti istinski uspješne s obzirom na to da nemaju zasebnu alokaciju sredstava, već koriste postojeća sredstva. Drugo, istražuje se sposobnost makroregionalnih strategija EU-a da premoste razlike između politika na razini EU-a s jedne strane i lokalnih politika s druge. Ideja je rada ponuditi pregled aktualnosti u kontekstu makroregionalnih strategija EU-a.

Ključne riječi: *makroregionalne strategije EU-a; Europska unija; kohezijska politika.*

* Dr. sc. Ivan Zeko-Pivač, Ministar savjetnik u Stalnom predstavništvu Republike Hrvatske pri EU, Bruxelles. Ivan.Zeko-Pivac@mvep.hr. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0000-0001-6013-6717.