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Subject:	Council conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies

Delegations will find in Annex the Council conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies, as adopted by the General Affairs Council at its meeting on 21 May 2019.

Council conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

(1) RECALLS

- a) its conclusions for setting up the four current macro-regional strategies of the Union, namely the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) of 2009, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) of 2011, the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) of 2014 and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) of 2015¹, as well as its conclusions of 22 October 2013 on the added value of macro-regional strategies², and of 21 October 2014 on the governance of the macro-regional strategies³;
- b) the Commission's intention to draft a single report every two years, starting end 2016, describing the progress made towards the implementation of all macro-regional strategies;
- c) the Council conclusions of 25 April 2017 on the first Commission report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies of 16 December 2016⁴;

¹ Council conclusions on the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (doc. 13744/09), Council conclusions on the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (doc. 8388/11 + ADD 1 REV 1), Council conclusions on the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (doc. 13503/14) and Council conclusions on the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (doc. 14613/15).

² Doc. 14926/13 + ADD 1

³ Doc. 16207/14

⁴ Doc. 8461/17

- (2) WELCOMES the submission by the Commission of the second report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies from 29 January 2019;
- (3) RECOGNIZES the role of macro-regions in fostering socio-economic and territorial cohesion and regional cooperation including through people-to-people contacts;
- (4) ACKNOWLEDGES that the report is based on examples which illustrate what has been achieved and focuses on concrete results, challenges and the way forward;
- (5) ACKNOWLEDGES the achievements and progress made in the last two years, highlighted by the report, taking into account the different stages of maturity of each strategy and different availability of deliverables and data, in terms of:
 - a) contributing to a better awareness of participating countries and regions on the interest of focusing on functional areas when addressing common challenges;
 - b) implementing concrete projects aiming at improving the quality of life;
 - c) endeavouring to strengthen relations between the participating countries and between the EU and non-EU countries, in a time when there is a growing need for deepening trust between countries and people;
 - d) setting up tools for monitoring the macro-regional strategies as requested by the Council;

- (6) OBSERVES the need for:
- a) rekindling the political momentum in support of macro-regional strategies including through high-level meetings and multi-level and multi-stakeholders governance and involvement;
 - b) increasing involvement, commitment and ownership of stakeholders and partners at local and regional level, as part of a bottom-up approach which brings an increased awareness of and a feeling of inclusion in the EU;
 - c) making progress in the communication activities such as the development of communication strategies and organization of events and activities;
- (7) CONSIDERS that macro-regional strategies should maintain a targeted and result-driven implementation with clear European added value, defined results, and that regular monitoring and review exercises should be ensured with support of various tools and the Commission; RECALLS the need for reliable and comparable data regarding the implementation of macro-regional strategies; RECOGNISES the progress done by the participating countries and the Commission and ENCOURAGES the continuation of such work on monitoring and evaluation for a stronger evidence-based assessment of macro-regional strategies results;
- (8) CALLS for the optimal use of existing financial resources, better use of existing institutions and better implementation of existing legislation based on the principle of no new EU legislation, no new EU institutions and no new EU funds and TAKES NOTE of the challenges encountered by the participating countries as regards the coordinated governance of the macro-regional strategies;

- (9) TAKES NOTE of the Commission's report and recommendations and, in this context:
- a) CALLS on the participating countries to strengthen ownership, to ensure appropriate political support at national level, while fostering the involvement of local and regional stakeholders;
 - b) CALLS on the participating countries and regions to empower key implementers, such as national coordinators, priority and policy area coordinators, horizontal action leaders, group leaders, members of steering and actions groups and focal points in the line ministries, and by providing adequate staff and enhancing political support to ensure the fulfilment of their task and their active participation in their groups;
 - c) INVITES the actors involved in the management of strategies to cooperate, learn from each other and to exchange best practices, and CALLS on the Commission to support and organise the sharing and transfer of such practices in cooperation where appropriate with networks and programmes;
 - d) UNDERLINES the need for an improved cooperation between policy/priority areas within the Strategies, by using for example the clusters of areas or joint steering committees;

- e) WELCOMES the ongoing work on the revision of the action plans of the EUSBSR and EUSDR, with a view to provide clear added value and a better articulation between their policy priorities and existing funding sources, while taking into account, where relevant, the specific timelines of the various processes concerned;
 - f) UNDERLINES the importance of continuing to use macro-regional strategies as a strategic framework promoting more coherent and synergic implementation of EU policies, programmes and funds such as: cohesion policy, rural development policy, pre-accession, neighbourhood and other EU sectoral policies, as well as of national, regional programmes and funds, including private funds, and to implement joint projects with a significant macro-regional impact and tangible results;
- (10)** CALLS on the participating countries and regions to take into account priorities of the macro-regional strategies in the programming and implementation of post-2020 relevant programmes under shared management and relevant IPA and NDICI programmes without prejudice to the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and legislative packages and respecting the principle of subsidiarity and partnership. In this context:
- a) CALLS on the strategy's key implementers and programme authorities in the countries participating in each strategy to better cooperate and coordinate with each other in order to identify priorities and measures of common interest which could be supported from EU programmes and funds across the macro-region and to promote the alignment between relevant post-2020 programming documents and the pertinent macro-regional strategy(ies) during the Programmes' negotiating process, in dialogue between the participating countries and the Commission;
 - b) EMPHASISES the importance of a close coordination among the programmes supporting the priorities of macro-regional strategies in order to have a targeted implementation across the macro-region.

- (11)** ENCOURAGES the key implementers of the macro-regional strategies to make better use of the programmes directly and indirectly managed by the Commission. In this context, CALLS on the Commission, where appropriate and in full respect of the objectives and integrity of these programmes:
- a) to identify, in cooperation with the participating countries, the concrete measures for strengthening the synergies and complementarities between the directly and indirectly managed EU programmes post-2020 and the macro-regional strategies;
 - b) to further improve and to actively support the alignment between post-2020 directly and indirectly managed EU programmes and the macro-regional strategies;
 - c) to provide, in close cooperation with the strategies' key implementers, a stock-taking of the participation of macro-regional strategies in the directly and indirectly managed EU programmes;
- (12)** INVITES the Commission and the participating countries and regions to take advantage of the links between smart specialisation strategies and clusters in order to better connect the ecosystems as well as industrial and innovation policies within the macro-regional strategies and to explore and further develop the complementarities with sea-basin strategies;
- (13)** CALLS on the Commission to keep playing a leading role in the strategic coordination of the macro-regional strategies and to further enhance the involvement of its relevant services;

- (14) CALLS on the Commission to take into account the findings from evaluations and reports of relevant funds and programmes for further work, implementation and development of the macro-regional strategies;
- (15) HIGHLIGHTS the macro-regional strategies role in contributing to the implementation of Agenda 2030 and its sustainable development goals, also by reducing social, economic and territorial disparities at EU level;
- (16) RECOGNISES the importance of the involvement of neighbouring non-EU countries. In this context, the Council STRONGLY SUPPORTS the inclusion of the Republic of North Macedonia into EUSAIR⁵;
- (17) REMAINS open to examine any commonly agreed and mature initiative of Members States facing the same challenges in a defined geographic area, aimed at setting up a new macro-regional strategy;
- (18) LOOKS FORWARD to the next report of the Commission on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies by the end of 2020.
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⁵ Doc. 7793/19