Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘EU Strategy for the Alpine Region’
(exploratory opinion)
(2015/C 230/02)

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On 27 October 2014, the European Commission asked the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, to draw up an exploratory opinion on:

An EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP).

The Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 18 November 2014.

At its 503rd plenary session, held on 10 and 11 December 2014 (meeting of 10 December), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 132 votes with 3 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The EESC welcomes the special care that has been taken in drawing up the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), the aim of which is to bolster cohesion and competitiveness to meet the challenges that single Member States or regions cannot tackle satisfactorily by employing the usual means.

1.2. The EESC notes that central to the development of the Alpine region is the Alps mountain range itself, which is very much the region’s calling card and serves as the economic, social and environmental fulcrum between all the areas involved in the strategy.

1.3. The Committee points out the strong political commitment to the EUSALP by the countries taking part and that both national and regional governments are very much informed and involved. This awareness of the issue is the result of a cooperation process launched in the area back in the 1970s.

1.4. The EESC thinks that the Alpine region’s distinguishing features — which include some of the most competitive territorial systems in the world, economic and social imbalances between ‘rural and mountain areas’ and ‘urban areas and cities’, the natural and cultural heritage and the very dense concentration of transport flows — are what define and shape it.

1.5. While the EESC endorses the strategy’s overall approach and believes its goals, pillars and priorities to reflect what is in the discussion document, it nevertheless feels that these should be incorporated and improved when the action plan is drafted.

1.6. The EESC notes that the area to be covered by the EUSALP is significantly above the European average in terms of economic development, environmental sustainability and social cohesion. Even so, the economic and financial crisis and the changes wrought by globalisation of the economy and markets are posing big, stubborn challenges to the macro-regions we are discussing. This is why the EESC maintains that achieving the overall aim of the EUSALP strategy — ‘to ensure that this Region remains one of the most attractive areas in Europe, taking better advantage of its assets and seizing its opportunities for sustainable and innovative development’ (1) — is extremely important for underpinning Europe’s economic competitiveness and social cohesion.

1.7. It is crucial, the Committee believes, to strengthen the EUSALP’s comprehensive approach to development by specifying new and more qualitative goals as set out in point 4.4 below.

1.8. The EESC would like to see the EUSALP action plan establishing greater interdependence between the priorities of competitiveness (pillar 1) and sustainability (pillar 3). This would make sure development goals were achieved without compromising the needs and chances of future generations.

(1) An EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), core document, European Commission.
1.9. For the first pillar, the EESC thinks it essential to ensure sustainable growth and to foster full employment, innovation, competitiveness and cohesion in the Alpine region through mutual solidarity between upland and urban areas. The priorities will be discussed in point 5.2 below.

1.10. Regarding the second pillar, the EESC endorses the promotion of territorial development based on cooperation between internal and external territorial systems, accessibility of services, sustainable mobility and upgrading transport modes and communication infrastructure. The priorities will be discussed in point 5.3 below.

1.11. Concerning the third pillar, the EESC thinks it essential to redouble efforts to achieve sustainable management and protection of the environment and to upgrade the area's territorial assets. The priorities will be discussed in point 5.4 below.

1.12. The EESC believes that without strong governance and targeted financial resources for capacity-building the EUSALP risks failing to deliver and forfeiting its strategic value. With this in mind, and echoing the Council conclusions, the EESC would like to see an action plan built on complementarity between funding programmes, consistency between institutional instruments and the creation of new macro-regional projects (2).

1.13. The EESC takes the view — already voiced in the conclusions of its opinion on the governance of macro-regional strategies (3) — that a bespoke governance system based on cooperation and coordination is needed for the design and launch of the EUSALP. With this in mind, the Committee thinks that for the strategy to work the EUSALP must have an effective multilevel governance (4) that can capitalise on both the horizontal dimension (civil society participation) and the vertical dimension (participation of local and regional authorities) that it combines with and reinforces, fully in keeping with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality (5).

1.14. The EESC would like to see organised civil society involved in capacity building and welcomes the launching of a permanent forum to represent and support the Alpine region’s social and economic partners.

1.15. It is crucial, in the EESC’s view, to boost employment — especially that of the young and the long-term unemployed — and to beef up measures to encourage social investment and adaptation of social security systems.

2. The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region: general comments

2.1. The purpose of this opinion is to assess the public consultation document on the ‘EU Strategy for the Alpine Region’ (6) (EUSALP), including in the light of earlier Committee opinions on macro-regional strategies.

2.2. The Alpine region covers five EU Member States (Italy, France, Austria, Germany and Slovenia) and two non-EU countries (Switzerland and Liechtenstein) and covers an area of 450 000 km$^2$ with a population of 70 million.

2.2.1. The territorial systems within the EUSALP are intricately connected to the Alps, which are not only their calling card, but also form the economical, logistical and environmental nexus between these territories (7).

2.3. In terms of the macro-regional policy the EU has been pursuing since 2009, the EUSALP’s geographical position not only acquires a strategic value from the cohesion policy perspective and continuity with the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBR) (8), the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) (9) and the EU Strategy forthe Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) (10), but is also a crucially important element in spreading the notion of macro-regionalism towards the eastern Mediterranean (3).

(1) European Council Conclusions, EUCO 23/1/11 REV 1, 23—24 June 2011.
(2) OJ C 12, 15.1.2015, p. 64.
(4) European Commission: European code of conduct on partnership in the framework of the European Structural and Investment Funds, C(2013) 9651 final.
(7) http://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu
(8) http://www.danube-region.eu
(9) http://www.ai-macroregion.eu
2.4. Since the 1970s, the Alpine regions, straddling the national borders that have historically divided them, have come to share a common awareness of the need to see the Alpine territorial system as a single entity to be preserved and enhanced. It is for these reasons that a series of interregional, transnational and cross-border initiatives were launched whose prime aims included promoting mutual understanding among the nations signing up in order to overcome linguistic, socioeconomic and ethnic differences in favour of greater integration at European level (12).

2.5. The milestones in getting the EUSALP up and running — set to conclude with Council approval by the end of 2015 (13) — were the Conference of the Alpine Regions in Bad Ragaz (June 2012) and the Grenoble conference (October 2013).

2.5.1. The Grenoble conference (14) adopted the Political resolution towards a European Union Strategy for the Alpine region, which identified the goals, the opportunities to be seized and the challenges to be met under three main headings: competitiveness and innovation, agriculture, forestry and tourism; energy, the environment and climate; and accessibility, communications and transport.

3. Consultation document: general framework, scope and objectives

3.1. The Alpine range is the element in the EUSALP strategy that permeates the entire territory of cooperation. The very diverse nature of the territory — mountain areas and surrounding foothills, accessible and remote valleys, lowlands and highlands, metropolitan areas and towns — is one of the main features distinguishing the Alpine region from other parts of Europe.

3.1.1. To get a better idea of where EUSALP goals and priorities should be focussed, we have come up with five types of location that characterise the Alpine region: Alpine metropolitan areas; Alpine cities; expanding rural areas; rural areas in decline; and tourist areas.

3.2. The Alpine region has many distinct features that merit special attention and distinguish the EUSALP from the macro-regional strategies for the Baltic, the Danube and the Adriatic and Ionian: it has some of the most highly developed regions in the world, with competitive economies, high living standards, and social and political stability; it also has glaring economic and social disparities between rural areas, plains and urban areas; a unique natural heritage and ecosystems; a cultural heritage that is a cornerstone of social cohesion and the development of the Alpine region as such; a concentration of traffic flows that has become problematic in terms of congestion and environmental protection.

3.3. The overall aim of the EUSALP strategy is to ensure that this region remains one of the most attractive areas in Europe, making more of its inherent resources and seizing the opportunities for sustainable and innovative development.

3.3.1. The way to do this will be by working on the three ‘thematic pillars’: ‘Improving competitiveness, prosperity and cohesion’, Guaranteeing accessibility and connectivity for all inhabitants’ and ‘Guaranteeing sustainability’.

3.3.2. First pillar: Improving the competitiveness, prosperity and cohesion of the Alpine region

3.3.2.1. Although the Alpine region constitutes Europe’s largest economic area centre of production and has great development potential, lack of economic, social and territorial cohesion remains a problem. The mountains are a challenge for the area’s even development. The EUSALP seeks to foster the region’s innovative economic development by configuring a more balanced model that heeds both the diversity of the territories and their specific characteristics. Support must be given to a competitive economy that can amalgamate prosperity, energy efficiency, quality of life and the traditional values that mark the area out.

(12) Working Community of Alpine Countries; Alps-Adriatic Alliance; Alps-Mediterranean Euroregion; European Region Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino; Alpine Convention; Alpine Space Programme, and cross-border cooperation.
(14) Conference held in Grenoble on 18 October 2013 attended by government representatives and presidents from the EUSALP constituent regions.
3.3.3. Second pillar: Guaranteeing accessibility and connectivity for all the inhabitants of the Alpine region

3.3.3.1. Balanced territorial development has to be fostered through environmentally friendly mobility models, sustainable transport systems, communications services and infrastructure. The Alpine region holds a strategic position in Europe's transport system, lying across both the north-south and east-west axes. It includes Europe's most important transport hubs and many Alpine passes that have territorial systems with particular environmental weaknesses. It is crucial to bring into play a coordinated policy that can satisfy the needs of transport, the wellbeing of the population and a healthy environmental balance. Given the disparate nature of the Alpine region and its complex geographical make-up, the concept of connectivity has to be extended in its case to embrace infrastructure and communications services.

3.3.4. Third pillar: Guaranteeing sustainability in the Alpine region

3.3.4.1. Preserving the Alpine heritage and fostering sustainable use of natural and cultural resources are absolute musts for the region. Water, mineral resources, a variety of very biodiverse landscapes and a rich and diversified cultural heritage are hallmarks that have to be husbanded and enhanced. Capitalising on the potential of resources such as water and biomass in an environmentally friendly way is crucial to boost the area's competitiveness and cohesion, since it can help achieve strategic aims such as energy self-sufficiency and the region's energy storage capacity.

4. Specific comments on the macro-regional dimension of the Alpine region

4.1. The Strategy for the Alpine Region enjoys strong political commitment and high recognition in the countries involved and is not just a challenge, but also a great opportunity for the EU itself. The EUSALP brief is to build up the economy, link up different areas and protect the environment of an area that is hugely important to Europe's economic competitiveness and social cohesion.

4.2. Developing the EUSALP requires a structured dialogue between the various stakeholders to identify and tackle particular needs together. Environmental, economic and social characteristics need to be scrupulously heeded, as do the strong mutual dependencies between urban and rural areas. This means that a broad and transparent dialogue has to be launched between stakeholders to piece together a strategy that enjoys broad support.

4.2.1. It is important that policies mesh with one another and further territorial cohesion. Some matters regarding economic innovation, transport modes and the environment are interdependent and cannot be approached in isolation at local level. They need the broader perspective that the macro-regional level has to offer.

4.2.2. With reference to the communication on the governance of macro-regional strategies (\(^{15}\)), the EUSALP's multilevel governance needs an effective horizontal dimension (civil society involvement) that combines with and reinforces the vertical dimension (participation of local and regional authorities), in full compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.

4.3. The EUSALP is, in the EESC's view, a crucial instrument in underpinning the Alpine region's work in areas such as economic globalisation, climate change, the information society, the knowledge-based economy, demographic change and movement of goods and people.

4.4. The EUSALP will make it possible to enhance the development of the Alpine region by deploying a comprehensive approach that makes the economic, environmental and social dimensions functional and interdependent. With this rationale in mind, and in order to illustrate this holistic approach with tangible objectives, the EESC has picked out five strategic goals that should be included in the action plan:

— fostering a dynamic SME system and a flourishing business sector that can create jobs;

— helping to make the most of traditions and social diversity;

— promoting balance and fairness in access to services of general interest throughout the Alpine region;

— encouraging shared responsibility and fair cooperation between Alpine territories.

— nurturing preservation and sustainable management of biodiversity, landscapes and natural resources.

4.4.1. Fostering a dynamic SME system and a flourishing business sector that can create jobs. The EUSALP must expand the capacities of the territorial systems competing in a global economy, supporting the retention and creation of good-quality jobs.

4.4.2. Helping to make the most of traditions and social diversity. The EUSALP must help to preserve the identifying features of the areas involved while at the same time building on local knowledge and traditions as a way of furthering economic development and social inclusion.

4.4.3. Promoting balance and fairness in access to services of general interest throughout the Alpine region. The EUSALP will serve to maintain and adapt the offer of services of general interest to meet the needs of those living locally, especially in geographically handicapped areas.

4.4.4. Encouraging shared responsibility and cooperation between Alpine territories. The EUSALP must be enlisted to underpin new approaches in shared responsibility and fair cooperation between Alpine region areas, such as vertical links between large cities and rural and tourist areas.

4.4.5. Nurturing protection and sustainable management of biodiversity, landscapes and natural resources. The EUSALP must be used to fortify the protection and sustainable management of biodiversity, landscapes and natural resources, striking the right balance between conservation work and initiatives to achieve a rational use of ecosystem services and products. Work also needs to be done on the adoption of environmentally friendly management models that distribute the benefits yielded by ecosystem products and services more fairly among different parts of the Alpine region.

4.5. The EESC thinks the EUSALP must operate in line with the decisions adopted by the Council. These stipulate, on the one hand, that macro-regional strategies should require neither additional resources, nor further regulation, nor management bodies (the three ‘no’s’) and, on the other, that action plans must be founded on complementarity between funding programmes, coordinated institutional instruments and the creation of new projects on a macro-regional scale. Capacity building requires particular attention.

4.5.1. The EESC thinks it essential to involve organised civil society representatives alongside public authorities in capacity building. One way to do this could be to set up a permanent forum to represent the social and economic partners.

4.5.2. The EESC believes that the considerable sums the EU has already put into regional programmes through the European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020 (16) are sufficient and should be used effectively to implement the strategy though action that is better coordinated and embedded in a unified strategic approach. Additional funding possibilities will be on hand in the 2014-2020 programming period though Community instruments such as HORIZON 2020 (17), COSME (18), CEF (19), EaSI (20), Erasmus+ (21) and LIFE (22).

5. Specific comments on the three pillars

5.1. The EESC thinks it is vital for more detailed priorities to be framed for EUSALP’s three pillars if the strategic objectives set out in the consultation document and the specific objectives in point 4 are to be met.

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5.1.1. The main challenge the Alpine region strategy should help to tackle is harmonising and improving the balance between economic, environmental and social sustainability goals.

5.2. First pillar: Development of the Alps — improving the competitiveness, prosperity and cohesion of the Alpine region

5.2.1. The EESC thinks it essential to make sure there is sustainable growth and to foster full employment, innovation, competitiveness and cohesion in the Alpine region, consolidating and diversifying particular economic activities to foster mutual solidarity between upland and urban areas.

5.2.2. Priorities

5.2.2.1. Encouraging the innovation and competitiveness of SMEs by improving credit-access systems, building up the capacity of companies to seize opportunities offered by the 2014-2020 EU programmes and the innovation procurement system (especially pre-commercial type procurement (23)).

5.2.2.2. Helping to boost developments in the green economy, including through the creation of new businesses, thus capitalising on the environmental characteristics of the Alpine region and the major production and innovation capacities that mark the area out.

5.2.2.3. Promoting Alpine region products through brand awareness (i.e. labels of origin and regional marketing). Making the most of ‘ecosystem products and services’ (24) is a further added value supporting the area’s competitiveness.

5.2.2.4. Bolstering collaboration between science and technology parks, universities, research centres and SMEs and boosting the capacity of research infrastructure and its ties with cutting-edge institutions of world standing. It would be good when drafting the EUSALP action plan to lay down a cross-cutting priority to support research and innovation work.

5.2.2.5. Framing a joint strategy to transform the Alpine macro-regional space into a world-class, sustainable tourist destination, making the most of its natural, cultural and historical heritage.

5.2.2.6. Making sure the ‘employment’ priority stays at the heart of the EUSALP, paying particular heed to the young and the long-term unemployed. It is crucial to support the creation of stable and good-quality jobs, which also serves to tackle the problem of seasonal employment that afflicts above all the upland and rural tourist areas of the Alpine region.

5.2.2.7. Supporting initiatives to create a single area for work, to foster labour mobility, to instigate transnational traineeships and work experience, to map out international training and career pathways, and to grant full recognition of academic and professional qualifications. Particular attention needs to be paid to the qualifications of those working in tourism, who suffer more from the seasonal nature of work.

5.2.2.8. Encouraging cooperation between the various territorial dimensions that define the Alpine region and reinforcing the role of metropolitan areas and cities as engines for competitiveness and social cohesion.

5.2.2.9. Helping to bring about action to encourage social investment and the adaptation of social protection systems by framing policies compatible with the European Commission communication on social investment for growth and cohesion (25).

5.2.2.10. Promoting measures to facilitate the inclusion of people with disabilities and prevent discrimination on grounds of race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation or gender.

5.3. Second pillar: Connecting the Alps — Guaranteeing accessibility and connectivity for all the inhabitants of the Alpine region

5.3.1. The EESC endorses the promotion of territorial development based on cooperation between internal and external territorial systems, accessibility of services, sustainable mobility, and upgrading transport modes and communication infrastructure.


(24) Goods produced by the ecosystem include food, water, fuels and timber, while services include water supply and air purification, natural waste recycling, soil formation, pollination and many other natural regulatory mechanisms.

5.3.2. Priorities

5.3.2.1. Nurturing the adoption of innovative approaches to provide basic services (education, healthcare, social services and mobility) for upland and rural areas in order to eradicate the digital divide and to roll out broadband throughout the area.

5.3.2.2. Expanding the use of ICT in all areas of general interest (administration, health services, jobseeking services, distance learning, e-commerce for Alpine products, etc.) and ensuring adequate availability of public services to meet the needs of the Alpine region’s various territorial systems, striking the right balance between density and accessibility of services provided.

5.3.2.3. Promoting integrated transport systems that facilitate exchanges within various territorial systems and improve management of goods and passenger transport in order to cushion the environmental impact and augment the benefits for local communities. Two of the essential elements needed to help sustainable development of transport in the Alpine region are a shift of goods from road to rail and measures to curb the use of secondary Alpine road corridors (for example, uniform tolls for all Alpine transport corridors).

5.3.2.4. Developing plans for interoperability and logistics at macro-regional level and enabling multimodal connection of infrastructure hubs (ports, airports and freight terminals) with the global network and with links to internal waterways.

5.3.2.5. Promoting thematic transnational networks on aspects relevant to Alpine development, such as risk management, tourism, sport, forestry, agriculture, energy and technology services.

5.3.2.6. Upgrading Alpine governance through more active civil-society involvement, at the same time supporting awareness-raising and making people better informed about the principal issues affecting the Alpine region.

5.4. Third pillar: Protecting the Alpine region — Guaranteeing sustainability in the Alpine region

5.4.1. The EESC thinks it essential to strengthen commitment to the sustainable management and protection of the environment and to enhance the area’s territorial assets.

5.4.2. Priorities

5.4.2.1. Accommodating action to support the Alpine region’s economic development with climate change commitments, detaching the growth and competitiveness of the territorial systems in EUSALP from consumption of natural resources and raw materials.

5.4.2.2. Making Alpine region local communities more aware of the value of ecosystem services and the fair and sustainable management of natural assets. The Alps are one of Europe’s most important sources of water: for this reason it is absolutely crucial to step up work to improve the management of the area’s water reserves and catchment areas.

5.4.2.3. Endorsing initiatives to further harmonise action to preserve the biodiversity of Alpine region landscapes and action to use them in an environmentally friendly way.

5.4.2.4. Developing transnational instruments and procedures for preventing and reducing risks (floods, landslides, avalanches, forest fires, etc.), integrated forest management (both in terms of environmental value and economic resource) and management of problems caused by land use (soil compaction and urban sprawl).

5.4.2.5. Supporting conversion to a post-carbon energy system by launching initiatives on energy efficiency, by creating decentralised distribution networks based on renewable resources, and by improving settlement models and public transport based on the concept of energy saving.
5.4.2.6. Developing and bringing on line integrated mobility systems in order to diminish reliance on cars and subsidising public transport as a service of general interest and, where possible, transport powered by renewable energy.

Brussels, 10 December 2014.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Henri MALOSSE