

**Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR)' (exploratory opinion)**

(2014/C 177/05)

Rapporteur-General: **Mr DIMITRIADIS**

Co-Rapporteur-General: **Mr PALMIERI**

On 20 November 2013, Maroš Šefčovič, Vice-President of the European Commission, asked the European Economic and Social Committee, to draw up an exploratory opinion on the

*EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR).*

On 15 October 2013 the Committee Bureau instructed the Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion to prepare the Committee's work on the subject.

Given the urgent nature of the work, the European Economic and Social Committee appointed Mr Dimitriadis, as rapporteur-general, and Mr Palmieri as co-rapporteur-general at its 495th plenary session, held on 21 and 22 January 2014 (meeting of 21 January 2014), and adopted the following opinion by 150 votes to 0 with 3 abstentions.

## 1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC welcomes the special attention devoted to drawing up a European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), in order to support cohesion and competitiveness in the light of challenges that cannot be satisfactorily resolved by single regions or countries through the usual means.

1.2 The EESC notes that the discussion paper does not mention the strategic value of Mediterranean cooperation. The EESC would like to emphasise that while Adriatic and Ionian regional cooperation is fundamental to assisting the countries of the Western Balkans in the pre-accession process, and strengthening links with the Danube and Baltic macro-regions, it is also essential to consider the Adriatic and Ionian area as a functional area of the Mediterranean basin.

1.3 The EESC believes that EUSAIR must adopt a comprehensive programme of action-oriented list of projects and schemes. The strategy should make use of best practice already developed in other macro-regional strategies (Baltic Sea, Danube and the Atlantic), the Union for the Mediterranean<sup>(1)</sup>, the Europe 2020 strategy, existing EU programmes and funding measures<sup>(2)</sup> and EU initiatives such as INTERACT to provide technical assistance and training<sup>(3)</sup>. It should also be operationally linked with other EU policies, such as Cohesion, Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies, the Connecting Europe Facility, trans-European transport and energy networks, Horizon 2020, the Digital Agenda, the COSME programme, Integrated Maritime Policy, and policy on the CEAS<sup>(4)</sup>. The result should be a practical list of measures, programmes and schemes to ensure greater cohesion for the people of the region.

1.4 The EESC notes the total absence of the private sector from the discussion paper and underlines the important role of this sector as an engine for growth and jobs. It emphasises the need for both the private sector and civil society stakeholders to be more actively involved in the EUSAIR strategy's preparation and implementation. It is strongly recommended that better use be made of the private sector's potential to attract investment (both local and international) and to create business opportunities.

---

<sup>(1)</sup> EESC exploratory opinion on *Developing a macro-regional strategy in the Mediterranean — the benefits for island Member States*, OJ C 44, 15.2.2013, p. 1.

<sup>(2)</sup> See *Regulation (EC) No 1638/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 October 2006 laying down general provisions establishing a European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument*, OJ L 310, 9.11.2006, p. 1.

<sup>(3)</sup> — [http://www.interact-eu.net/about\\_us/about\\_interact/22/2911](http://www.interact-eu.net/about_us/about_interact/22/2911);  
— <http://www.interact-eu.net/ipvalencia/ipvalencia/117/619> (INTERACT point for the Mediterranean in Valencia).

<sup>(4)</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Policy plan on asylum — an integrated approach to protection across the EU*, COM(2008) 360 final.

1.5 The EESC believes that the strategy should include a stronger social dimension, in order to better support inclusive growth in the Adriatic and Ionian region. It is also vital to involve representatives of 'excluded' social groups in the social dialogue, such as migrant communities, people with disabilities and women's organisations, and to fully support EU policies aimed at preventing discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin, disability, age, sexual orientation or gender.

1.6 The EESC regrets that the discussion paper does not adequately address the issues surrounding irregular and illegal migration flows. The EU must devote more effort to helping the Adriatic and Ionian region cope with the challenge of migration and to integrate immigrants into society.

1.7 The EESC believes that policing and security are very important to the progress and prosperity of the Adriatic and Ionian region and calls on the Council to increase FRONTEX's budget and power to act <sup>(5)</sup>.

1.8 Although in recent years several partnership initiatives and projects relating to macro regional issues have been carried out in the cooperation area concerned ('Adriatic Euroregion', 'Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce', 'Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities', Uniadriion, etc.) the EESC would also point out that this strategy has taken a long time to materialise despite the fact that discussions on the 'Adriatic and Ionian Initiative' began as far back as October 1999 at the behest of the Italian government and were officially established in May 2000 with the 'Ancona Declaration'. After all this delay all of a sudden the time-frame for the final approval has been condensed making it extremely difficult for members of the EESC to work properly on the Committee's stance.

## 2. EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR): background and problems

2.1 The first cooperation effort in the Adriatic and Ionian region was the *Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe*, which was launched in 1999. This was a framework aimed at strengthening peace, democracy, human rights and the economy in the countries of South Eastern Europe from 1999 to 2008. Under this initiative, and at the Finnish EU Summit held in Tampere in October 1999, the Italian Government presented the *Adriatic and Ionian Initiative*, which was officially established in Ancona (Italy) on May 2000 through the signing of the *Ancona Declaration*. This declaration represented the 'cornerstone policy' for strengthening Adriatic and Ionian territorial cooperation, and promoting political and economic stability, thus creating a solid base for the process of European integration. Initially signed by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy and Slovenia, the Initiative was later extended to the federative union of Serbia and Montenegro.

2.1.1 With reference to the *Ancona declaration*, several institutional cooperation networks were activated to support cohesion and competitiveness in the Adriatic and Ionian region: the Adriatic and Ionian Euroregion, the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Cities, the Forum of Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce, Uniadriion and the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative.

2.2 On 19 November 2012, at the ministerial meeting between the Commission and Foreign Ministers from the Adriatic and Ionian Region, the following decisions were adopted:

- Strong backing for the new strategy was given by all parties;
- The new strategy would use the best practice and experience of the Danube <sup>(6)</sup> and Baltic <sup>(7)</sup> macro-regional strategies;
- Measures should not overlap with the Maritime Strategy;
- The strategy would be provided with the necessary human resources, dedicating an appropriate number of staff to its drafting and implementation;
- Concrete measures and projects would be identified in the action plan;
- Additional areas and members could be considered at a later stage.

<sup>(5)</sup> The EESC's own-initiative opinion on *Irregular immigration by sea in the Euromed region*, OJ C 67, 6.3.2014, p. 32.

<sup>(6)</sup> COM(2010) 715 final.

<sup>(7)</sup> COM(2009) 248 final.

2.3 Following the decision of the European Council on 14 December 2012 <sup>(8)</sup> to establish a new macro-regional strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas before the end of 2014 and, in order to respect the mandate received, the Commission services would start drawing up a communication and an action plan, which should be approved by the end of the Italian Presidency.

2.4 On 22 October 2013, the Council, for the first time, adopted strategic criteria for the basic characteristics of the macro-regional strategies. These were:

- Strengthening cooperation among the Member States concerned, with interested non-concerned states and with interested non-EU countries in areas of common interest;
- Mobilising a variety of available financing sources and the relevant stakeholders towards improved policy development and implementation of different EU, national and regional policies;
- Improving existing cooperation mechanisms and networks;
- Contributing to developing and improving access to financing for the new high-quality projects.

2.5 The Adriatic and Ionian strategy enjoys strong political commitment and awareness in the countries involved and represents not only a challenge, but also a great opportunity for the EU itself. The strategy's mission is to 'connect and protect'. It will support cohesion beyond the borders of the EU, in an area that is extremely important for the stability of the continent.

2.6 The Adriatic and Ionian strategy politically and technically complements the Danube macro-region (which includes several States also involved in the Adriatic and Ionian strategy) and the Baltic macro-region.

2.7 The Adriatic and Ionian region is facing a number of major challenges, such as ecological and environmental issues, inefficient transport connections and inadequate cooperation for boosting cohesion, competitiveness and innovation. One key factor in dealing with this successfully is to enhance the modern business culture and development of SMEs in the region by promoting cooperation between them and the transfer of best practice.

2.8 A strategy based on a macro-regional approach can provide valuable impetus for supporting Balkan and Eastern European countries' integration into Europe, for supporting integrated development policies and better use of EU and national funds, and for strengthening exchanges and partnerships between civil societies in the countries involved.

2.8.1 Macro-regional cooperation facilitates progress towards alignment with EU standards — the 'acquis communautaire' — thus having a positive impact on the path towards Europe and on the stability of the Adriatic and Ionian countries, as well as at regional level. Furthermore, a macro-regional strategy is essential to promoting cohesion and socio-economic integration between territories.

2.8.2 Any effective macro-regional approach to strengthening synergies between different EU policies and coordinating the efforts of a wide range of stakeholders in the Adriatic and Ionian region should be based on the 'three YESes rule': more complementary funding, more institutional coordination and more new projects. In this a major role would be accorded to the private sector.

2.8.3 A well-structured macro-regional strategy can provide a common European framework to promote cultural enrichment and the empowerment of national civil societies at regional level. This is particularly important for regions such as Eastern Europe or the Balkans, where the consolidation of democratic practice goes hand in hand with the development of a thriving and dynamic public sphere.

2.8.4 A macro-regional strategy could make it possible to plan infrastructure development on a trans-national geographic scale, promoting the development of ICT networks, highways, railways and ports, thereby ensuring territorial cohesion and competitiveness without barriers or bottlenecks.

---

<sup>(8)</sup> European council conclusions: EUCO 205/12/, 14.12.2012.

2.9 Despite the lengthy start-up of the project, it has recently been declared urgent and the final rounds are being compressed to the detriment of the final outcome.

### 3. The discussion paper: scope and objectives

3.1 In EUSAIR, the Ionian Sea represents a common and pivotal factor. The strategy should focus on areas of mutual regional interest with high relevance for the Adriatic and Ionian countries and clarify all the practical issues (basic pillars, governance, etc.). The priority areas and objectives of the action plan should be developed by governments and the social partners' representatives as shared aspirations and sustainable solutions to common challenges, paying specific attention to maritime and marine investment for growth and employment.

3.2 The overarching aim of EUSAIR is to promote the sustainable economic and social prosperity of the Adriatic and Ionian region through growth and job creation, by improving its attractiveness, competitiveness and connectivity, while also preserving the environment of inland areas and coastal and marine ecosystems.

3.3 This aim will be achieved through activities carried out in line with four thematic pillars<sup>(9)</sup>: driving innovative maritime and marine growth; connecting the region; preserving, protecting and improving the quality of the environment and increasing the region's attractiveness.

3.3.1 **First pillar: Driving innovative maritime and marine growth.** Fishing<sup>(10)</sup> is a very important economic activity for the Adriatic and Ionian coastal areas and their inhabitants. The basic goal of this pillar is to develop a strong, high-quality fisheries and aquaculture sector that will be environmentally and economically sustainable and will create new jobs.

3.3.2 **Second pillar: Connecting the region.** The region is in a very important geostrategic area on Europe's northern, southern, eastern and western axes. The Adriatic and Ionian seas constitute an important crossroads for goods, passengers and energy. Several European countries depend heavily on these areas for imports and exports. The Adriatic Motorways of the Sea will be a viable, reliable and competitive transport service for goods and passengers. Passenger ship crossings and oil and gas transport are increasing year on year. Unfortunately, in addition to commercial maritime traffic, the Adriatic and Ionian Seas are also used by criminal networks engaged in illegal trafficking.

3.3.3 **Third pillar: Preserving, protecting and improving the quality of the environment.** The Adriatic and Ionian coastal and marine environment hosts a huge diversity of habitats and species. The combined action of high anthropogenic pressure and topographic characteristics make these habitats highly susceptible to pollution. Cooperation between coastal stakeholders takes place within the regulatory frameworks of the *Marine Strategy Framework Directive*, the *Barcelona Convention* and its protocols, as well as the *Joint Commission for the Protection of the Adriatic Sea and its Coastal Areas*. River runoff and maritime transport both have a significant impact on the Adriatic Sea.

3.3.4 **Fourth pillar: Increasing regional attractiveness.** The tourism sector is economically significant as one of the main and fastest-growing activities in the region. In many cases, it is the economic backbone of coastal regions and, increasingly, of the hinterland as well. The cruise sector alone is showing strong potential for growth. Over the past 10 years, the demand for cruises has roughly doubled worldwide. This has been reflected in the Adriatic and Ionian area, which is already seeing rapid growth. Moreover, cultural and archaeological heritage in the region represents a strong asset which should be fully exploited. The new macro-regional strategy should help tourism stakeholders tackle internal and external challenges such as increasing competition from other destinations, as well as seasonal fluctuations and penetrate new markets which the tourism industry has ignored until now such as tourists with disabilities and elderly tourists. A macro-regional approach to coastal, maritime and other forms of tourism could provide an incentive to strengthen governance and to involve private players and international financial institutions.

<sup>(9)</sup> Four pillars: an indicative structure for action agreed between the 8 Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Commissioner J. Hahn on November 2012.

<sup>(10)</sup> European Parliament: Report on a fisheries strategy in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas (2012/2261 (INI), A7-0234/2013).

#### 4. Specific comments on the discussion paper

4.1 The EESC notes that awareness of the different issues varies considerably between the people of the countries of the region. The extreme diversity of experience, with four member states and four non-member states, all with very different levels of awareness and development, requires a strategy for the region which is properly tailored to the territorial potential in each one.

4.1.1 Hence, there is a need for the Commission to help raise awareness and to secure the direct involvement of the private sector and wider society organisations. In any case this is a big challenge.

4.2 The EESC agrees in principal with the discussion paper, which analyses in detail the basic ingredients for supporting the smart, sustainable and inclusive growth of the Adriatic and Ionian region. The four pillars adequately describe the main problems, challenges and objectives.

4.3 The EESC would like to commend the efforts which have been made to draw up a strategy for the Adriatic and the Ionian Seas. The draft for discussion has identified weaknesses, set out synergies and a common vision and has put forward a set of proposals that form a sound basis for developing the strategy, including a set of realistic measures and the active participation of all the stakeholders.

4.3.1 The EESC believes in the crucial role that the macro-regional strategies could play for the countries of the region. A well thought-out strategy can provide an overall reference framework and could be considered a stability-boosting exercise, which is always a prerequisite for attracting private sector investment within and from outside the region.

4.3.2 The EESC endorses the priorities that have been identified as the region's strengths, such as its importance as a hub for the movement of goods, people and energy and its competitive advantages for blue activities and tourism. It appears that these sectors can become real drivers for investment, growth and employment.

4.3.3 The EESC also agrees with the findings of the draft strategy, confirming that synergies for cooperation in the region have to be strengthened. The EESC therefore believes that the action plan should emphasise the importance of establishing clustering and networking platforms to engage in common initiatives for tackling shared weaknesses and should draw up a common vision for developing sustainable, highly competitive economies in the region.

4.3.4 The EESC notes that the document fails to adequately address some important aspects concerning territorial, social and economic cohesion.

4.3.5 The EESC recommends that relevant issues such as research, innovation and SMEs' development and Capacity Building should not be proposed solely as cross-cutting aspects, but should be given a more prominent role to become real drivers for supporting regional cohesion and competitiveness.

4.3.6 The discussion paper makes no mention of the strategic value of Mediterranean cooperation. While Adriatic and Ionian regional cooperation is fundamental to assisting the countries of the Western Balkans in the pre-accession process, and to strengthening links with the Danube and Baltic macro-regions, it is also essential to consider the Adriatic and Ionian area as a functional area of the Mediterranean basin.

4.3.7 Problems related to irregular migration flows are not adequately dealt with. In particular, the involvement of the southern Italian regions (Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily) in the Adriatic and Ionian strategy makes it necessary to focus more on humanitarian and safety issues related to migration from North African countries.

4.3.8 The EESC believes that in its present form, the strategy contains a relatively long list of problem areas, structural weaknesses and objectives. The extensive list does not serve any useful purpose and should be trimmed down to a more manageable list of realistic measures. It would therefore recommend restricting the content of the strategy to the most important areas of action, or prioritising the activities in the short, medium and long term starting with the most important issues.

4.3.9 The EESC believes that the Adriatic and Ionian strategy should fully include all stakeholders, such as governments, regional and local authorities, universities, research institutions, private-sector businesses and SMEs, social partners, NGOs and civil society, as proof that the strategy adheres to the principles of multilevel governance and active citizenship <sup>(11)</sup>.

4.3.10 The EESC takes note of the decisions taken by the Council to the effect that a macro-regional strategy should not require more money, more regulation or new management bodies (the three NOs), but believes that more funding is needed for technical assistance in order to secure successful implementation of the strategy in the future.

4.3.11 The EESC also believes that the considerable funding that has already been committed by the EU for regional programmes through the structural funds represents adequate means, which must be used effectively for the strategy's implementation, through more coordinated action, subject to a unified strategic approach.

## 5. More specific comments regarding the four pillars

5.1 **Driving innovative maritime and marine growth:** The EESC notes that the sea has rightly been identified as a fundamental element that can help provide the countries concerned with dynamic economic sectors and enable people to find gainful employment. It believes it essential to draw up new programming models able to ensure the integration and complementarity of the blue economy's value chains (Blue Food, Blue Tourism, Blue Industry, Blue Logistics and Blue Resources).

5.1.1 The strategy correctly identifies blue activities as sectors on which to focus, given that aquaculture has already attracted sizeable investment in the large countries in the region and which others can use as examples. New investment in facilities and supplementary activities would therefore be expected to generate quick returns, making it attractive for financing through the EIB and private foreign and local investment.

5.1.2 The EESC agrees on the need for a 'business resource-efficient culture' as a means of improving management practices in the major areas of activity. Countries in the region, especially the non-EU countries, face limitations and a restrictive business philosophy that could greatly benefit from close cooperation in adopting a new business culture. The EESC considers that private businesses should be engines for the success of this endeavour.

5.1.3 The EESC recommends that the proposed idea of making this region a centre for 'innovative' activities be a very long-term objective. At present, the region has only limited capacity. The strategy should therefore aim to build synergies and improve training and educational infrastructure so as to gradually develop blue activities and to reduce imbalances in the demand for and supply of qualified skilled labour. The EU, supported by the business community, the two sides of industry and civil society, can play an important role in transferring and supporting best practice and expertise in the region.

5.1.4 The EESC considers that fisheries play an important social and economic role in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, but that basic infrastructure in some countries is inadequate. The action plan should therefore study the situation carefully and present a realistic plan. It also urges non-EU countries to demonstrate greater commitment to European legislation on fisheries.

5.2 **Connecting the region:** The EESC believes that, up to now, there has been a pronounced lack of efficient, cost-effective connectivity between the countries of the region, particularly as regards meeting energy requirements. In addition, transport and communication connections with the hinterland and the islands are inadequate. The EESC agrees that it is necessary to improve maritime and air connections within and outside the region and hence deems it essential that the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and the Ionian seas <sup>(12)</sup> adopted in November 2012 becomes one of the main components of EUSAIR, making it possible to develop an efficient transport connection system, particularly for landlocked and outlying areas.

<sup>(11)</sup> COM(2011) 884 final.

<sup>(12)</sup> COM(2012) 713 final.

5.2.1 The EESC supports the proposed Motorway of the Sea for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas so as to better manage road traffic congestion, narrow the competitiveness gap for islands and hinterland areas and improve connections with the other Mediterranean transport corridors.

5.2.2 The EESC feels that the discussion paper does not give the necessary prominence to energy issues, since the EU is continuously searching for alternative sources of energy and for new routes with oil- and gas-exporting countries. Major new pipelines connecting Europe with energy producers are apparently planned to pass through the Adriatic and Ionian Region. One example of this is the agreement between Azerbaijan, Greece and Italy regarding TAP.

5.2.3 The EESC believes that, given the problems of drug trafficking and irregular migration that hallmark the area, the Adriatic and Ionian region needs an upgraded governance model, an effective policing system and closer cooperation between regional and EU authorities. The EESC therefore calls on the European Council to increase FRONTEX's budget and its power to act.

**5.3 Preserving, protecting and improving the quality of the environment:** in line with the EU's demanding environmental policies, the EUSAIR strategy has adopted ambitious targets. The EESC welcomes this approach, given the importance of biodiversity and the existence of habitats that are highly susceptible to pollution. It supports the proposals for closer cooperation between coastal states, within the regulatory frameworks of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the Barcelona Convention, and the Joint Commission for the Protection of the Adriatic Sea and its Coastal Areas. The EESC believes that some of the region's countries may not be ready for such an ambitious policy and would need further encouragement including possible financing for firms to adjust their production in line with ecological standards.

5.3.1 The EESC believes that the major area of action under this pillar is implementation of the provisions of the Water Framework Directive<sup>(13)</sup> aimed at reducing nitrate emissions, in order to improve the marine environment.

5.3.2 It also endorses the adoption of advanced management techniques for traffic, so as to reduce marine litter and ballast discharges and to promote projects for waste management in land-based coastal activities.

5.3.3 The EESC supports implementation of Marine Spatial Planning approaches, Marine Protected Areas, Natura 2000 and Integrated Coastal Zone Management.

5.3.4 The EESC would note that compliance is necessary not only for EU members but also — and especially — for non EU members in order to facilitate their entry into the Union.

5.3.5 The EESC also believes that enhancing cooperation at all levels for exchanging best practice among the authorities of Marine Protected Areas is an effective way of protecting the environment.

#### 5.4 Increasing regional attractiveness

5.4.1 The EESC strongly supports the role of tourism which is expected to register further growth in the future<sup>(14)</sup> to becoming coastal regions' primary economic activity. Tourism has attracted major European companies that are investing in quality tourism and making large increases in tourist traffic possible. It provides many economic benefits, driving growth and creating well-paid jobs, especially for young people. However, as tourism becomes intensive, mitigation measures must be provided to reduce any negative effects on the coastal and marine environments on which it depends so heavily.

5.4.2 The EESC suggests that tourism be subject to strict management practices, in an attempt to make it more environmentally friendly as well as more inclusive. The Committee would point out that the business community, the two sides of industry, and civil society can offer invaluable support in this regard.

---

<sup>(13)</sup> Directive 2000/60/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 October 2000.

<sup>(14)</sup> UNWTO expects the number of tourist arrivals worldwide to increase by 3,3% on average per year until 2030. See further UNWTO highlights from the 2012 edition at [WWW.UNWTO.org](http://WWW.UNWTO.org). Europe accounts for over half of international arrivals and is the fastest growing region.

5.4.3 The EESC believes that the cruise sector should be given a bigger role, while being better managed and integrated into the tourist product and it would support a stronger focus on maritime tourism through new policy initiatives and Europe 2020 objectives as part of the Commission's attempts to develop an integrated strategy for coastal and maritime tourism.

5.4.4 The EESC wishes to recommend that cultural and archaeological aspects be strongly integrated into tourist activities. Tourism should be differentiated by involving other activities such as conferences, eco-tourism, agro-tourism, thematic products and routes, academic study, business and the creative industries. The EESC strongly believes that all the tourist activities have to be driven by the principles of Universal Design.

5.4.5 The EESC believes that the macro-regional strategy should help tourism stakeholders to tackle internal and external challenges such as increasing competition from other destinations and seasonal fluctuation issues, and to penetrate new markets which the tourism industry has ignored until now such as tourists with disabilities and elderly tourists, by adopting best practice in developing regional integrated territorial development action plans.

Brussels, 21 January 2014.

*The President*  
*of the European Economic and Social Committee*  
Henri MALOSSE

---