12 key messages on the future of macro-regional and sea basin strategies

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The CPMR has been actively engaged in the reflection on macro-regional and sea basin strategies since their inception. The regional membership of the organisation spans both the four existing macro-regions and other relevant sea basin strategies and initiatives. The very structure of the CPMR by geographical commissions corresponding to sea basin mirrors the main rationale behind the strategies.

This note is the result of a wide-ranging reflection on the matter, which the CPMR has conducted with and through its geographical commissions. The document addresses 12 messages to the EU institutions with a view to improving the potential of the strategies in the coming years.

Regarding macro-regional and sea basin strategies, the CPMR calls on the European institutions to:

1. Support the contribution of the strategies to the recovery and twin transition
2. Keep promoting stronger links with Interreg programmes, including by increasing their future budget
3. Facilitate synergies with mainstream programmes
4. Encourage cooperation on smart specialization including under the new Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument
5. Reinforce the strategies with more financial support, including from member states
6. Reflect on a possible review of the “3 NOs rule”
7. Improve multilevel governance
8. Boost emerging strategies in key geographical areas while reinforcing existing ones
9. Foster the involvement of non-EU countries
10. Exploit the framework of the strategies to support the new EU-UK relations
11. Strengthen ownership and communication of the strategies
12. Develop the insular dimension within the strategies
1. **Support the contribution of the strategies to the recovery and twin transition**

For some of the current challenges, the EU is not always an optimal regulatory area, being either too large or too small. In many cases, the scope of some problems is regional (for instance around a shared sea basin or a mountain area) rather than EU-wide, and is best tackled through regional cooperation.

Thus, macro-regional and sea basin strategies provide an ideal policy framework through which public authorities can cooperate to deliver the post COVID-19 recovery and achieve the green and digital transition. They can facilitate the identification and joint implementation of valuable projects in such areas. The CPMR calls on Member States to fully exploit this potential and on the European Commission to encourage it.

The CPMR is of the view that the National Recovery and Resilience Plans can fully meet their ambition only through a participatory governance and place-based approach. To this end, the embedding of macro-regional priorities in the implementation of recovery plans would be highly valuable, also in light of the possibility for the recovery funding to finance cross-border or transnational projects. This would help strengthen the territorial dimension of the plans and identify additional projects to be funded.

2. **Keep promoting stronger links with Interreg programmes, including by increasing their future budget**

The CPMR welcomes the requirements for an improved alignment between macro-regional/sea basin strategies and transnational cooperation programmes set out under the new Interreg legal framework. For the future, it also supports promoting a better alignment with relevant Cross Border Cooperation programmes whilst ensuring a margin of flexibility in defining the cooperation areas of each programme. These links would be also strengthened by improving programmes and projects coordination as part of the European Territorial Cooperation framework. These interactions could be also coordinated by existing dedicated programmes such as Interact.

At the same time, the CPMR calls for provisions designed to encourage relevant programmes to take more account of and step up their contribution to the priorities of emerging strategies. The CPMR considers that the budget earmarked for the European Territorial Cooperation objective in the 2021-2027 period remains too small vis-à-vis macro-regional or sea basin strategies’ expanding priorities and asks for a more ambitious envelope to be agreed during the mid-term revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) due by end 2024.

3. **Facilitate synergies with mainstream programmes**

The CPMR welcomes new provisions aimed at strengthening the embedding of macro-regional and sea basin strategies priorities in mainstream programmes, including the possibility to finance projects outside the programme area and involving external actors. It invites the European Commission to provide comprehensive guidance to managing authorities in this area whereas considerable administrative challenges emerged in the past.

Moreover, the CPMR is available to work with the European Commission on supporting the identification of regions willing to test pilot actions on the “embedding process” in the current programming period. The CPMR calls on the European Commission to reflect upon the possibility to set out a separate policy objective (or investment priority) on cooperation for mainstream programmes in the future.

4. **Encourage cooperation on smart specialization including under the new Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument**

Cooperation on Smart Specialization Strategies (S3) is already taking place to various degrees and in various forms in the framework of the strategies. The CPMR considers important that the Commission encourages these synergies by means of different actions. For instance: targeted support under the Interregional Innovation Investment (I3) Instrument or the Thematic Smart Specialisation Platforms, especially when the strategies could act as incubators or boosters for synergies and give more dynamism to public private cooperation (e.g. in the blue economy sector). The macro-regional dimension should also be promoted to achieve synergies between Smart Specialization Strategies featuring blue economy priorities, building on DG MARE and the Joint Research Centre initiatives in this area.
5. Reinforce the strategies with more financial support, including from member states

Leveraging on other EU funding sources to realize the full potential of the macro-regional and sea Basin strategies is essential. The CPMR calls on the Commission to set the right conditions for enabling the participation of partnerships/projects with a macro-regional interest in direct management programmes, such as Horizon Europe, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), LIFE+. This could be achieved through targeted calls or specific selection criteria under these programmes.

The support of the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), via its direct management strand, should also be expanded, capitalizing on the calls launched in the framework of the 2014-2020 period. The CPMR calls on Member States to set clear commitments as to the contribution of national funds to the strategies. Local and regional authorities should also be encouraged to devote additional funding to the strategies given the benefits in terms of political ownership across local communities. EU support to establishing a secretariat for macro-regional strategies, with stable funding sources, should be systematized. It is indeed a prerequisite to maintain a high and equal level of engagement and treatment of all parties involved in a macro-regional strategy.

6. Reflect on a possible review of the “3 NOs rule”

The CPMR understands the main rationale behind the “3 NOs rule” (no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures and no new EU legislation), notably to make Member States more responsible and accountable towards the strategies and avert overlaps or complexities in their implementation. However, these three principles seem to have proved in many ways an obstacle rather than an incentive to the development of the strategies. The CPMR is of the opinion that a reflection is needed to assess and address the shortcomings of this approach in view of a potential revision, so as to increase the sound financial support devoted to the governance, the design of projects, macro-regional and sea Basin strategies.

7. Improve multilevel governance

A well-functioning governance structure is critical to the success or failure of the strategies. Regional authorities are already playing a key role at implementation level. They should however be able to participate in a more structured way in the strategic decisions taken at political level. Across the existing macro-regional and sea basin strategies, there exist different degrees of involvement and shared responsibilities. The CPMR is convinced that impactful results can be obtained only by increasing the (political) ownership of the strategies at all governance levels. The CPMR therefore supports a greater involvement of regional authorities in the governing bodies of all strategies, as well as in the steering of flagships, priorities and key actions that can make the difference.

8. Boost emerging strategies in key geographical areas while reinforcing existing ones

The CPMR welcomes progress in the building of new sea basin and macro-regional strategies, and puts forward some key recommendations towards their positive future development. In this regard, the CPMR calls for a new understanding of the relation between sea basin and macro-regional strategies:

- The CPMR welcomes the progress both in the development of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and Western Mediterranean Initiative (WestMED), and believes that stable cooperation and synergies should be stronger between them. The two strategies show that there is a clear rationale for an integrated cooperation approach across the Mediterranean basin to give coordinated answers to similar objectives, challenges and solutions. Therefore, the CPMR calls for giving more impetus to the process towards the creation of an integrated Mediterranean macro-regional strategy. This endeavour should rely on the work of leading platforms such as the Mediterranean Cooperation Alliance (MedCoopAlliance), while counting on the support of key institutions, such as the European Parliament, the Committee of the Regions, and the present French and coming Spanish presidencies of the EU Council. To this extent, the coherence with the macro-regional vision in the new governance dimension of the 2021-2027 Euro-MED and NextMed programmes is especially relevant. The CPMR acknowledges the importance of the Union for the Mediterranean as partner in the inclusive, balanced and sustainable development of the Mediterranean basin.
• The CPMR welcomes the adoption of a new action plan for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) in 2021, which is more focused and adapted to the emerging challenges. If the Action Plan is not a revolution, the inclusion of a climate perspective in all policy areas is satisfactory since the strategy has a key role to play in helping realize the objectives of the EU Green Deal. At the start of the implementation phase, the CPMR calls however for further involving of regional authorities in the governance structures of the EUSBSR, so as to ensure stronger regional perspectives in the various policy areas. The condition for an effective implementation of the EUSBSR is to have a strategy that relies on local and regional actors and meets territorial needs.

• The CPMR reiterates its support to the creation of a macro-regional strategy for the Atlantic area and calls on the Council to mandate the European Commission to set it up without further ado. The new strategy should be based on an integrated vision of the multiple relations between coastal and hinterland areas of the Atlantic macro-region. The maritime dimension, more specifically the priorities of the sea basin strategy for the Atlantic, should be incorporated in the future macroregional strategy. In line with the political declaration adopted by the CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission in December 2020, the Atlantic macro-region should equally reinforce its maritime nature and foster the innovation potential linked to the areas of common interest in terms of smart specialization and support connectivity in the Atlantic territories.

• The CPMR welcomes the revamped interest in building a sea basin strategy in the North Sea area. It stands ready to contribute to mustering full institutional support to this initiative. The CPMR has always advocated a comprehensive approach to the North Sea Region: trans-national, cross-sectoral and multi-level. The challenges faced by the region in the years to come demand closer cooperation as highlighted in the CPMR North Sea Region Strategy 2030.

9. Foster the involvement of non-EU countries
The strategies are also providing a key contribution to deepening the links with non-EU countries, in particular accession countries, strengthening their connection to the EU. The CPMR is of the view that the role of the strategies in the context of the EU Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, as well as relations with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, should be reinforced given the potential benefits they could bring. Additional means are needed to support this process, for instance through a stronger alignment with IPA and new ENI CBC programmes and with the priorities of the strategies and via the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe).

10. Exploit the framework of the strategies to support the new EU-UK relations
The CPMR is of the view that the macro-regional and sea basin approaches could help streamline the new relationship between the EU and the UK. Macro-regional and sea basin strategies could provide an optimal framework for cooperation between EU and UK stakeholders. The CPMR, aware of the diversity of cross-border territorial areas for promoting cooperation with the UK (or territories under its sovereignty that exist after Brexit), calls on the Commission to develop a reflection upon this.

11. Strengthen ownership and communication of the strategies
According to the Eurobarometer, only a tiny percentage of citizens are aware of the sea basin or macro-regional strategies. Moreover, the ownership of the strategies remains relatively weak across a large spectrum of stakeholders. The CPMR believes that a higher level of awareness and ownership can be a catalyst for the future development of the strategies, helping to bring new ideas and forces into the process. In order to achieve this ambition, it is essential to step up efforts to involve the civil society, the business sector as well as citizens, including the youth, in the strategies. Existing initiatives, such as the Adriatic Ionian Network of Universities, Regions, Chambers of Commerce and Cities (AI-NURECC Initiative) under the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region, have proven the high benefits of developing this approach. The CPMR supports the Commission’s efforts to strengthen the communication of the strategies and stands ready to contribute to the reflection on additional actions. Initiatives in this area could range from establishing regional ambassadors to involving the end beneficiaries.
12. Develop the Insular dimension within the strategies

The CPMR is of the idea that, where appropriate, strategies should have a well-defined insular dimension with dedicated objectives and actions. An insular impact assessment would help to develop measures to ensure equal opportunities of cooperation between islands and the continental regions, in compliance with article 174 of the TFEU.

The Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) represents more than 150 regional authorities from 24 countries across Europe and beyond. Organised in Geographical Commissions, the CPMR works to ensure that a balanced territorial development is at the heart of the European Union and its policies.

Rond-Point Schuman | 1040 Brussels, BELGIUM
info@crpm.org | +32 (0)2 612 17 00

6, Rue Saint-Martin | 35700 Rennes, FRANCE (siège)
info@crpm.org | +33 (0)2 99 35 40 50