EU strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region

2014/2214(INI) - 17/06/2014 - Non-legislative basic document

PURPOSE: to propose a European Strategy for the Adriatic region and Ionian sea.

BACKGROUND: home to more than 70 million people, the Adriatic region plays a key role in strengthening geographical continuity in Europe. It contains a total of 8 countries, these being Italy, Greece, Slovenia, Croatia, Albania, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro, but remains open to other regional partners.

The European Council of December 2012 requested the Commission to present an EU

Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region **(EUSAIR**) by the end of 2014. The general objective of the Strategy is to promote sustainable economic and social prosperity in the Region through growth and jobs creation, and by improving its attractiveness, competitiveness and connectivity, while preserving the environment and ensuring healthy and balanced marine and coastal ecosystems. This will be achieved through cooperation between countries with much shared history and geography. By reinforcing implementation of existing EU policies in the Region, the Strategy brings a clear EU added value, while offering a golden opportunity for all participating countries to align their policies with the EU-2020 overall strategy. It will also contribute to bringing Western Balkan countries closer to the EU by offering them opportunities for working closely with Member States, to address common challenges and opportunities specific to the Region.

CONTENT: this Communication sets outs the needs and potential for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in the Adriatic and Ionian Region. It provides a framework for a coherent macroregional strategy and Action Plan, to address those challenges and opportunities, through cooperation between the participating countries.

Challenges: the Adriatic-Ionian Region is facing a set of common challenges. Historically, a substantial part has been affected by difficult political and economic circumstances as well as conflict. However, Slovenia's and Croatia's accession, and the EU perspective of other countries, provide an opportunity to reinforce links and to overcome the legacy of the past. Major challenges are:

- **socio-economic disparities**: both in terms of GDP per head and unemployment rates, there are stark contrasts between countries. While some regions enjoy a GDP per head of 20% above the EU average and 4% unemployment rate, others have a GDP per head which is 70% below this average, and unemployment rate of 30%;

- **transport:** the Region has significant infrastructure deficits, notably between long-established EU Member States and the other countries, resulting in poor accessibility;

- **energy**: interconnection of electricity grids remains inadequate, preventing the development of an integrated energy market, limiting capacity and hindering profitable exploitation of renewable energy sources;

- **environment:** increased human use of the marine and coastal space threatens ecosystems. Unsustainable tourism activities put pressure on water, land and biodiversity. Shallowness and its semi-enclosed nature make the Adriatic Sea vulnerable to pollution ;

- **natural and man-made hazards and risks entailed by climate change**: in addition to major seismic activity, the Region is exposed and vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change ;

- **administrative and institutional issues**: capacities at national, regional or local level must be reinforced to ensure that structures are fit for working with cross-border counterparts, as well as for cross-policy coordination.

Response to challenges through the Strategy: in the face of these common problems, the Commission sets out a rolling Action Plan, accompanying the Strategy and expanding the maritime dimension to include the hinterland, structured around four interdependent pillars of strategic relevance :

- **Blue Growth** ;

- **connecting the Region** (transport and energy networks) ;

- **environmental quality** ;

- **sustainable tourism**.

The Plan also has two cross-cutting aspects:

- **capacity-building**, including communication, for efficient implementation and for raising public awareness and support;

- **research and innovation** to boost high-skilled employment, growth and competitiveness. Cooperation within transnational networks can bring ideas to markets, and help develop new products and services.

Furthermore, **climate change mitigation and adaptation** as well as **disaster risk management** are horizontal principles for all four pillars.

-Blue Growth: the objective of this pillar, coordinated by Greece and Montenegro, is to drive innovative maritime and marine growth in the Region by promoting sustainable economic development and jobs and business opportunities in the Blue economy, including fisheries and aquaculture.

-Connecting the region: coordinated by Italy and Serbia, the objective of this pillar is to improve transport and energy connectivity in the Region and with the rest of Europe and develop infrastructure networks and regulatory frameworks. Coordinated monitoring of maritime traffic and multi-modal transport will increase competitiveness.

-Environmental quality: coordinated by Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, this pillar entails addressing environmental quality, contributing to good environmental status for marine and coastal ecosystems, reducing pollution of the sea, limiting, mitigating and compensating soil sealing, reducing air pollution and halting loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystems.

-Sustainable tourism: the objective of this pillar, coordinated by Croatia and Albania, is to develop the full potential of the Region in terms of innovative, sustainable, responsible quality tourism. Diversification of tourism products and services, along with tackling seasonality, will boost business and create jobs. World-wide marketing of an Adriatic-Ionian "brand" of tourism products and services will increase demand.

A series of initiatives are set out in the Communication for each of these areas in the Strategy.

Governance: in order to ensure the success of the Strategy, it is proposed to strengthen coordination between participating countries, as well as between different ministries and decision-making levels within each country, and ensuring as high-level political dialogue.

Funding: the Strategy is implemented by mobilising and aligning existing EU and national funding of relevance to the four pillars and topics. In particular, the European Structural and Investment Fund and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance for 2014-2020 provide significant resources and a wide range of tools and technical options.

Other funds and instruments relevant to the pillars are available, notably Horizon 2020 for all pillars, the Connecting Europe Facility for Pillar 2, the LIFE programme for Pillar 3, as well as for mitigation and adaptation to climate change, and, for Pillar 4, the COSME programme for SMEs. Other means are available, notably from the Western Balkan Investment Framework, the European Investment Bank and other International Financial Institutions.