

## Revision of the EUSAIR Action Plan and Strategy

### Position of Italy

In June 2020 the Belgrade Declaration first acknowledged the relevant changes in the geography of the Strategy, with North Macedonia entering EUSAIR, and call on EUSAIR key implementers to look for ways to link EUSAIR activities more effectively to the enlargement process of the Western Balkans. In May 2021 the Declaration of Izola acknowledged both that relevant changes occurred in the membership of EUSAIR, and that the region has to face new important challenges. This led the countries political representatives to ask for a revision of the Strategy content and implementation, based on the revision of the Action Plan. In May 2022, the Declaration of Tirana welcomed the start of the process of revision of EUSAIR Action Plan to adapt the Strategy to respond better to current challenges and needs of the region, including the changes in its membership; committed the EUSAIR Action Plan revision process to ensure that EU enlargement will be strengthened; reaffirmed the need that EUSAIR clearly contributes to the EU Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, recognized that EUSAIR has to face the key challenge of socio-economic recovery, coming from current crises (pandemic, Ukraine), recalled the need to better involve young people in the life of EUSAIR.

#### 1. The content

Going through the current Action Plan and the state of the art of the EUSAIR implementation it becomes clear that the Strategy itself has to be further developed, while keeping its original approach, scopes and objectives, to accommodate the changes requested by the participating countries.

**Italy considers that two changes in the Strategy are needed:**

- **the highlighting of a clear cross-cutting dimension ensuring that the Strategy better serves the scope of accelerating and strengthening the EU enlargement process, and all IPA countries become EU members in the shortest possible term, provided that they have implemented all necessary reforms and have adopted the *acquis communautaire*;**
- **the addition of a pillar focused on the social dimension of a sustainable, balanced and resilient development, faced to unexpected and serious crises (pandemics, conflicts, disasters).**

The European perspective of the Western Balkans has been a clear reference framework in the design of EUSAIR; the recent changes in the EUSAIR membership and geography increased the potential of the Strategy to be a relevant and effective tool in facilitating the enlargement process. As pointed out by the study “EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) facilitating the enlargement process of Western Balkans” (2021), the Strategy may serve to strengthen and accelerate the EU enlargement process by supporting IPA countries in associating them with EU decision making mechanisms and in supporting national reforms aimed at implementing EUSAIR priorities. To adequately respond to the Tirana Declaration, the EU enlargement dimension has to be clearly reflected in the content of the pillars, in the identification of the actions, in the selection of the projects, in the monitoring and evaluation of the results. Enlargement has a cross-sector nature, and it includes a wide range of actions. Strengthening the EU enlargement process in EUSAIR cannot be achieved by simply adding some actions or projects, or by adjusting the governance model, it requires the adoption of a systematic approach to be clearly identified and adopted all along the strategy implementation. Therefore, Italy asks for the addition of a new cross-cutting dimension, “EU enlargement” to the two already included in the Strategy (research and innovation, capacity building). Entering this third aspect can be an opportunity also to reinforce, and make clearer in the revised Action

Plan, how the consideration of the existing cross-cutting dimensions has to be taken into account along the implementation of the Strategy.

A sustainable development is by its nature strongly connected to the objective of cohesion, in all its dimensions (economic, social and territorial). While the economic and environmental aspects of development have been explored by the Strategy, its social dimension remains implicit. The Tirana and Izola Declarations made reference also to social aspects, such as young empowerment and civil society inclusion, to be considered in the review process.

A more social and inclusive Europe is not only one of the five political objective of EU Cohesion policy 2021-2027, it is a relevant component of European fundamental rights and values, linked to peace, democracy, equality, freedom. In 2017 an Interinstitutional proclamation designed the European Pillars of Social Rights, to support the European construction in the 21 century, and respond to current and future challenges. Its first Action Plan was adopted in 2021, and Member states defined national targets by 2030.

Italy considers that the Strategy should show how the participating countries will contribute to the construction of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and improve the preparedness of the region to respond to crises, by entering a new Pillar in the Strategy, that could be focused on some specific dimensions: 1) Health. The need for better cooperation became urgent and evident with the COVID pandemic; to improve the Adriatic-Ionian region capacity to operate in a coordinate way in the field of health protection and people wellbeing would provide a strong support to socio-economic recovery, and to become more prepared to pandemics. 2) Young people. To stimulate the empowerment of young generation, by increasing their capacity to active participate to the social and economic life, and by supporting their possibilities of developing and reinforcing their skills in a wider European framework Young people were and are strongly affected by the consequences of the COVID pandemic, and by the Ukraine crisis. To promote their skills and potential is a crucial factor for the socio-economic recovery, and for a sustainable development of the Adriatic-Ionian region. 3) Child. To protect children from the consequences of sudden crises (such as pandemics, wars, natural disasters and other catastrophes) means both to defend a fundamental right, and to invest for the future of the region. At European level a Child Guarantee has been designed to ensure child protection and support; there is room and value to explore the potential of better cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region in such theme. 4) No discrimination To promote respect of diversities and equal opportunities in a social and economic environment free from discrimination is a strong asset to promote sustainable development, contribute to the 2030 Agenda objectives, promote innovation at large. Better cooperation and exchange can pave the way to enhance cohesion in the region, and promote quality of life, encouraging economic and social development.

## **2. The Governance and the implementation mechanisms**

Italy is in general satisfied by the Governance system adopted for the implementation of the Strategy, and considers that during its first period of implementation remarkable steps were made towards achieving concrete results. The revision of the Action Plan can surely bring to technical improvements of the toolbox supporting the Governance (e.g.: data collection and monitoring, project selection and evaluation procedures, consultation of stakeholders and civil society, functioning of TSGs and sub-groups), to be better defined in the coming months, also taking into account the inputs that will come from the TSG and the stakeholders.

To increase the effectiveness of the Strategy, Italy proposes that a time horizon is given to the Action Plan, in order to keep the Strategy as a long period general reference framework, and to provide a clearer timetable to the selection and implementation of the projects. Italy suggest

that the Action Plan is aligned with the duration of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MMF), in order to promote the process of embedding of the projects in the programs and projects co-financed at EU and national level. When a new MMF is defined, the Action Plan should not expire, to ensure continuity, but should be reviewed, to make the changes and improvements that would be necessary, based on the evidence of monitoring and evaluation procedures. To have a clear alignment with the MMF would provide evidence and concreteness to the “rolling” character of the Action Plan, as stated in the Strategy, and encourage stakeholders to proactively promote the embedding of the EUSAIR projects within the timeframe and financing framework of European and national projects.