**Report / 5th EUSAIR Forum Belgrade**

The 5th Forum of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) was held in a virtual form in Belgrade on January 28thand 29th2021, under the slogan "Strengthening the Adriatic-Ionian Region through Cooperation".

The Minister of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia, **JadrankaJoksimović**, opened the 5th EUSAIR Forumand gave the first address, emphasizing that after challenging and difficult 2020 we were entering new era hand in hand, joining our forces in region so that all of us come out as winners. She also pointed out her certainty that our regional cooperation would be an important segment of revitalizing Europe.

The representatives of the countries included in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region were addressed in the official opening by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia **Nikola Selaković**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia **Anže Logar**, European Commissioner for Cohesion and Reform **Elisa Ferreira**, European Commissioner for Enlargement **OlivérVárhelyi**, Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Northern Macedonia for European Affairs **Nikola Dimitrov**, and Special Envoy of the Director General of the WHO for Covid 19 **David Nabarro**.

The Forum was jointly organized by the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the European Commission, with the support of the EUSAIR Facility Point project.

Over 640participants from nine countries of the Adriatic-Ionian Region met again this year at the virtual Annual Forum to discuss the progress of the regional strategy and define further development.

The 5th EUSAIR Forum brought together officials from participating countries and the European Commission, relevant experts and policy makers, as well as the general public to discuss the future of the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy and its role in addressing key issues in the region.

**The beginning of the first day of the Forum was marked by the Plenary Session, the topic of which was the Post-Covid Projection of EUSAIR - How to cooperate in the new reality? Dual digital and green transition as a regional response to the Covid19 crisis.**

**Normunds Popens**, Deputy Director-General, DG Regional and Urban Policy gave an introductory speech. MrPopens referred to the difficult times we were going through in Europe and world. He expressed the hope that we could only learn from times like these and that together as a humanity we would make some conclusions for the future. He also pointed out that we needed to make sure that our actions and decisions respect planetary boundaries within our realm of living. He said that the first priority in the previous year was to coordinate and efficiently respond to crisis so all available financial resources at the EU level were mobilized to support invention and introduction of the vaccines. Also, a very large amount of funds through The Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative was directed to support different parts of our societies, small and medium enterprises, health sector and others. MrPopens concluded that we had to emerge from this crisis stronger together, not just by solving contingences from the past but also investing in the future using all instruments at our disposal.

European Commission the keynote speaker **Florence Gaub**, Deputy Director, EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), spoke about Global Trends to 2030: Challenges and Choices for Europe. She gave her perspective of the crisis seen as an opportunity despite the hardships it caused. She said that in the time of crisis people switched to different mode of doing things and that Covid crisis accelerated some trends one of which was digital. MsGaub spoke about McCinsley study showing that digital transformation of the business sector had been accelerated for seven years. She stated it that it was a push forward because the digital sector would be the economy of the future.

**Mathew King**, Acting Director, Directorate I – Competence, Joint Research Centre (JRC), European Commission spoke about strengthening resilience – achieving the strategic long-term objectives of the digital, green and fair transitions. He said that Covid introduced us to our vulnerabilities that we wanted to overcome for a longer period, not just short term, to develop resilience as EU. We were looking at four main themes: social and economic resilience, resilient green transitions, making digital transition resilient and to achieve political aspects of what resilience meant. He said we knew that foresight could help us to anticipate problems and help us create sort of momentum for change for policy actions that we needed to take at European level.

**Ellie Schlein**, Vice President, Emilia Romagna Region, Italy spoke about specific opportunities and challenges in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region in the context of the green, digital and just transitions. She said that pandemic itself challenged the idea of border, it showed how fragile we were. She pointed out that we needed more cooperation to get out of this crisis and to rebuild better future. MsSchlein also said that digital transformation and ecological transition were the key to build this better future, but there was also a third priority - collision. So, territorial cooperation in the Adriatic – Ionian region must be seen as an instrument for sustainable territorial development.

**Sandra di Biaggio**, ESPON European Grouping spoke on Territorial Cooperation-territorial development dynamics in the Adriatic and Ionian Region.

**SoukeynaGueye**, Research Analyst in Ellen MacArthur Foundation presented research about circular economy: a transformative Covid-19 recovery strategy. She said that circular economy was delivering mechanism for achieving key and mutually reinforcing objectives offering an economic opportunity, reducing resource dependence, helping tackle key challenges like climate change, creating new jobs, stimulating innovation and increasing resilience.

**SinisaMarčić**, Expert on Human Capital Development, Regional Cooperation Council- regional capacities for innovation- had a presentation on “what makes a strong innovation community”. He explained that one of the key regional mechanisms was the Action plan endorsed by the Western Balkan leaders in Sofia summit in November last year called Common regional market. The key idea behind the plan was to assist economies in the region develop in certain fields: digital transformation, skills development, green circular economy and innovation. He said that the main goal was to make favorable market for investments and overall development and for the first time innovation was identified as proper tool for sustainable economical development.

**Wim De Kinderen**, Vice-Chair of the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL) – gave a presentation about the theme "Citizens’ participation - how can living labs help create better solutions and policy responses to existing challenges".

At the end of this session **Gino Sabatini**, President of the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce, President of Marche Chamber of Commerce spoke about a business perspective of post-Covid-19 economic recovery and resilience. He emphasized the strong need for economy and business sector to closely cooperate with policy makers and that they needed to take similar activities, to take dialog and together create strategies to take us out of the crisis.

In conclusion, it is very important to have resilience strategies working in line at all levels (from EU to national, regional, local level) to cope with digital and green transformations and after effects of the pandemic. The event like this, EUSAIR Forum, is important as it brings together both national and regional partners to discuss their strategies and goals, to collaborate and develop joint plans and use existing regional collaboration mechanisms to resolve common problems.

**During the first day of the forum, four thematic sessions were dedicated to the Pillars of cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian Region – Blue Growth, Connecting the Region (including Energy Networks and Transport) and Sustainable Tourism.**

Vivid discussion was followed during the first thematic session dedicated to **Blue Growth (Pillar1)**. Speakers from various branches (national ministries, academic, institute researches as well as European Commission) discussed the topic on fresh water aquaculture production which still needs to be discovered and promoted in the Adriatic and Ionian region.

Participants agreed that aquaculture can provide multiple benefits in terms of food security, employment, and economic development while reducing the dependence on often overexploited wild fishery stocks. Challenges for overall sustainability of aquaculture sector in regional, national, and local level, are related to administrative procedure, financial support, access to space, market issues, integration in local economy and similar.

Freshwater aquaculture in AI Region, due to more or less traditional way of farming, still requires further innovative activities and the exchange of best practices to increase efficiency and competitiveness of the sector. In this respect, new financial perspective 2021-2027 as well as other EU and international instruments could serve as potential for financing innovative approaches and activities in this field. EU included aquaculture in its framework which in the period 2021-2027 will be European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF).

Taking into account findings from presentations, it is needed to improve communication in terms of product in order to increase visibility of aquaculture sector, raise awareness and to boost public image. Nevertheless, it is obvious that there is a common potential in the field of fresh water aquaculture in terms of growth, raising competitiveness and resilience, green recovery, unpolluted nature and clean waters.

**Speakers of the thematic session for Pillar 2 - Connecting the Region: Energy Networks**spoke about Energy Networks for a Green Adriatic-Ionian Region and the necessity of EUSAIR to be at the forefront of coordinated efforts by its participating countries to achieve environmentally sustainable solutions for the energy transition. There are 3 important conclusions to point out:

First, the **EUSAIR as a key role** in accelerating and contributing to the **transition towards more integrated and interconnected** energy systems through the Adriatic-Ionian Region and beyond. To confront the climate challenge enhanced collaboration and harmonised energy programmes and investments are needed with a view at **green carbon-neutral economies in the long term.**

Second, **new power lines, new gas interconnection and infrastructure, adoption of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency** as described here and more should be envisioned **to strengthen energy security and resilience** while protecting environment, promoting economic growth, innovation and industrial leadership.

Third, **concrete policy and coordinated regulatory measures** at EUSAIR and multilateral level are essential to **prepare and shape the green Adriatic-Ionian Region while respecting the different starting points of Member States.**

**Thematic session - Connecting the Region: Transport (Pillar 2)** gave the experiences and possible solutions to reduce the negative impact of Covid-19 on Transport and Mobility in the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

The session represented occasion to present lessons learned to date and challenges for the coming Post COVID 19 period. EU member States as well as the Western Balkans have been affected by transport restrictions resulting in financial difficulties form most transport companies. Weaknesses in the EUSAIR region can be summarised and are: a) the Region relies too much on road transport, b) border crossing points suffer from a lack of coordination between EU Member States and non-EU ones, c) Cross-border infrastructures are sub-optimal. In this context, EUSAIR countries should ensure connections and complementarities between large scale projects, actions and regional initiatives. They should also monitor the potential needs and gaps at regional level and focus on smart and innovative transport. In December 2020 the EU adopted the Sustainable Mobility Strategy which is in line with the European Green Deal. In this context Western Balkans should also follow these strategic objectives.

During the pandemic period there were common actions between the CEFTA and the Transport Community. In this sense, the exchange of data for all goods of first necessity was successful as well as the implementation of « green corridors » across the AI Region. Waterway transport was also affected during the pandemic period although there was no interruption due to good maintenance. However, traffic by cruise ships on the Danube has been drastically reduced since March 2020. Air transport has also been affected. Comparison of flight destinations between October 2019 and October 2020 shows that the number has considerably declined within the EUSAIR region. However, potential for airports development is still important. In some cases, the pandemic has been a stimulus for new transport solutions and improving the performance of the existing transport supply.

With the pandemic in 2020, the overall economy in the region has been deeply affected but the overall forecast for the period up to 2022 remains good. In this context, transport will play a key role in the future of the economic development of the EUSAIR region including during the post-COVID 19 recovery.

**Thematic Session about Sustainable Tourism (Pillar 4)** gave an excellent overview of the new trends and experiences in sustainable tourism, with a sharp and detailed profile of a modern day tourist, and the summary of his expectations.

Tourism of the EUSAIR with a wide-ranging impact on the region is the key ecosystem important for EUSAIR destinations, the enterprises and employment depending on the consumer’s perspective, so this should be taken into account:

1. Entrepreneurship and SMEs are the drivers of the revival of the European tourism, they are being tested by the unprecedented crisis, and are asking for all urgent support from EU
2. CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE is important, and we are recognizing the portrait of the future traveler in the EUSAIR region, taking into account safety and security and touchless approach, but also looking for new responsibility and humanization. The new pioneer and explorer will be in search for authentic and unique cultures, private retreats, silent and open spaces, vibrant destinations, cultural routes, transformative experiences and an insight into the living tissue of the rural, remote and small cities.
3. DESTINATION MANAGEMENT, , should be integrated in a holistic and smart design, supported by unique thematic products, redistributing tourism interests, fully taking into account data and tourism flows, sustaining all resources, providing the new quality of life for local communities
4. TECHNOLOGY ORIENTATION and data driven enterprises point towards virtual reality, which still needs significant work and improvement, acquisition of trainings and interdisciplinary competencies but presents an opportunity for new visibility of resources.
5. SUSTAINABILITY ORIENTATION is driving prosperous and responsible businesses
6. COMMUNITY ORIENTATION is desirable in combination with the slower travel and more time to understand & learn about the destination, offering participatory travel experience, presenting the new chance for micro-enterprises as social and economic drivers for new jobs and EMPLOYMENT orientated towards balanced regional development.

Tourism relies on the full confidence and trustworthy people to people relation. The new vision of tourism is responsible, transformative and resilient fully devoted to our brave new consumers.

**Special session at the first day of forum was dedicated to celebration of 30 years of Interreg.**

To celebrate the jubilee and achievements of Interreg in bringing cross-border communities closer together and introducing new policies and practices through transnational exchanges, this session showcased testimonials of various projects representatives and their beneficiaries as inspirational examples of good cooperation practices that connect and jointly develop the region.

Narrator **IvanoMagazzu** from the Interact Programmefeaturedeight projects representingsymbolically the heart of what Interreg is about.Some of presented projects had their virtual exhibition stands where participants could hear more about their stories.

Projects that were presented:

* XBIT –implemented under the Interreg-IPA CBC Croatia – Serbia
* Museum stories –implemented under the IPA CBC Serbia – Bosnia and Herzegovina
* Inter Bike 2 –implemented under the Interreg Italy – Slovenia
* SAGOV –implemented under the Interreg-IPA CBC Italy - Albania – Montenegro
* COOP MDD –implemented under the Interreg Danube
* OIS-AIR –implemented under the Interreg ADRION
* TOURISMED –implemented under the Interreg Mediterranean
* TRANSPOGOOD –implemented under the Interreg Italy – Croatia

**The second day of forum was dedicated to three themes: Environmental Quality, Cultural and Creative Industries in Region and Embedding EUSAIR priorities in the post-2020 funding instruments.**

**The first parallel thematic Session had a theme Environmental Quality (Pillar 3) - Importance of blue and green infrastructure in light of the new EU biodiversity framework: How to enhance the delivery of essential ecosystem services throughout the Adriatic-Ionian Region?**

Special attention must be given to **the alignment of policies and approaches** across the Adriatic-Ionian Region in order to establish the joint management and the **investments in the landscape infrastructure** to support green/blue corridors. This will contribute to the effective management of shared natural resources.

**Macro-regional strategies should translate the EU policies** in order to mobilize local institutions, cities, agencies, universities, private sectors and civil society towards better implementation of green infrastructure to **foster green and blue corridors**. This will at the same time **halt habitat degradation,** including habitat fragmentation**,**and with it **the loss of biodiversity** and ecosystem services.

**Europe’s large carnivores** (such as grey wolf, Eurasian Lynx and brown bear) require extensive well-connected habitats to sustain viable populations and can be thus considered also as convenient umbrella species for conservation of significant proportion of biodiversity in the region and wider. On this note **green infrastructure** is very important in the Adriatic-Ionian region as their landscape provide important habitats for large carnivores, due to its favourable natural predispositions and strategic geographic position.

**Special parallel session Post-Covid recovery of the Cultural and Creative Industries in the Adriatic-Ionian Region**

The panel dedicated to Culture under the title Post-Covid recovery of the Cultural and Creative Industries in the Adriatic-Ionian Region encompassed attitudes from regional experts in the field of culture. The experts exchanged their views and experiences in dealing with the Covid-19 crises in different areas of culture and proposed measures and solutions for recovery of the cultural sector.

The panelists agreed that the pandemic resulted in the hyper-production of the digitized cultural content but that digital cannot replace live cultural events and the social dimension of culture.  The focus should be on public good, not only on profit generation. They underlined the importance of strategic approach and long-term financing of the cultural sector and the necessity of institutional and budgetary changes as well as the importance of participatory governance in culture. The cultural sector needs radical healing instead of going back to the “old normal”.

The Pandemic has shown that Culture is the highest human need!

**Plenary session - Embedding EUSAIR priorities in the post-2020 funding instruments and support for enlargement**

Moderators of the session were IlzeCiganska and IvanoMagazzu, Interact Programme.

**IlzeCiganska**emphasized at the beginning of the session that EUSAIR was built on cooperation of the larger territorial impact, and in order to achieve the long term objectives in this region the countries had jointly identified the set of priorities called flagshipswhich showed the direction for the cooperation investments in this period.

**Andrea Jerina**, EUSAIR National Coordinator from Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Slovenia, pointed out that the Adriatic Ionian Strategy and also the Danube Strategy where the Western Balkans countries play the important role were basically the functioning policy and cooperation frameworks that could significantly foster implementation of regionally agreed processes on the ground.

Macro-regional strategies act as a bridge between the EU and local policy making. They can also be a vehicle that is ready to facilitate and deliver implementation of the EU initiatives but also the economic and investment plan for Western Balkans. And all these could be achieved through the process of the embedding. As the macro-regional strategies do not have their own recourses the start of the current programming period presents the best opportunity for all macro-regional strategies to bridge the gap between their needs and the funding opportunities.

The following speaker was representing the Presidency of the Council of Ministers in Italy, Ivana Sacco, and she stated: “We are convinced that in order to achieve objectives we need to take key implementers on board both at EUSAIR and national level. A coordination of key implementers is important for different reasons - they need to understand that embedding is part of a broader and coordinated process that involves all the countries of the area.”

**Lodovico Gherardi** from the Managing Authority of ADRION Programme, Emilia-Romagna Region, Italy – explained how to adopt a smart multi scalar approach. He also showed what could be the focus of the future programmes in terms of thematic covered.

**Massimo Mina**, Strategy and Turkey, MFF, Programming and Evaluation Unit, DG for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, European Commission, said that responsibility of each of the IPA 3 beneficiaries was to make sure that the priorities and the flagships of the EUSAIR were reflected in the strategic responses so that part of the IPA 3 funds could be allocated to the action that serve at the same time the national and the macro-regional objectives under the different thematic windows of the programming framework

He also pointed that the European Green Deal was the first political priority of the European Commission and it was a strategic reference for the Green Agenda to support the transition in the IPA beneficiaries towards a circular climate resilient and low carbon economy.

Next speaker **Aleksandra Radinovic**, Head of Division for Planning and Programming of EU funds and Development Assistance in Areas of Economic, Infrastructure, and Regional Development, Ministry of European Integration, Serbia – discussed about connectivity projects. She said that the regional approach for the connectivity project was of really high relevance for the transport and energy as having transport meant that a country could cooperate with its neighbors. She also said that in the light of economic and investment plan for the Western Balkans, Republic of Serbia proposed 12 projects and the total amount of this investment project was 1.5 billion Euros. Mostly proposed projects are the transport and Energy and 7 of them are projects that are marked as flagship projects within the European and economic investment plan.

**Bojana Zoric**, Senior Policy Analyst, Regional Cooperation Council – pointed that the 2020 taught us that the regional cooperation continued no matter what, and the hardships experience in the face of the pandemic last year in a way only gave an impetus for the Western Balkans to go beyond the existing frameworks of cooperation and do more. And it was also the pandemic that reaffirmed unwavering support of the EU for the Western Balkans as integral part of Europe which was later on resulted in the economic and investment plan.

**Eleni Marianou**the Secretary General of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) said that the way macro-regional strategy set the framework for action was a good way forward.

The central point of this discussion was the conclusion that having the finances secured the only missing elements were concerted effort and the embedding.

**Conclusions and closing remarks**

At the closing session of the 5th EUSAIR Forum **Pavle Jankovic**EUSAIR National Coordinator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbiapointed out that 5th EUSAIR Forum gathered more than 640 participants, distinguished speakers, experts, exhibitors who with excellent utilization of modern technologies were allowed to interact together, so that 5th Forum felt almost real. Meetings and discussions allowed us to see where we stand when it comes to the most important issues related to implementation of EU strategy for Adriatic – Ionian Region, to examine how we could and should continue our work in the future, having in mind new reality that Covid 19 pandemic crisis brought. Closer sinergies of EUSAIR with the enlargement process is the key to support EU perspective for the Western Balkans. Embedding EUSAIR priorities in the EU post 2020 funding instruments is vital for EUSAIR to achieve its objectives and for the programs to improve and increase their impact by cooperating and coordinating actions across the macro-region.

**Andrea Jerina** EUSAIR National Coordinator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia emphasised the cooperation in the region. She said that we had mutual trust and mutual respect which were essential elements for joint work. Many of these results were presented in these two days of the forum and they gave us trust in the future that whatever we did in the macroregional level it had an important contribution to the most important actions within the EU.

**Jean-Pierre Halkin** Head of Unit D1, DG Regional and Urban Policy said that this strategy was a unique framework of nine countries of the Adriatic – Ionian Region and the only EU strategy where there were more non EU countrieswhich were taking the presidency very successfully. What we heard the last two days were messages of unconditional support to each of the four pillars of macro regional strategy and message of unconditional support to the enlargement process. He also pointed out three big priorities for the future of the EUSAIR and its revision:

* COVID 19 reaction
* Green and Digital transition
* Enlargement

**Colin Wolfe** Head of Uni at Western Balkans Regional Cooperation and Programmes (DG NEAR) stated that EUSAIR contributed to two key components of the EK policy approach to the Western Balkans. The first is cooperation which was the main message during two days of forum. In this sense EU strategy for Adriatic – Ionian Region provides basis to demonstrate importance of cooperation. Second is that EUSAIR gives a very key of the European perspective of the region. EUSAIR really facilitate the key emphasis put on cooperation and European perspective of the region and full use of resources that EU is providing for the region.