



PRIORITIES OF THE HELLENIC PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN STRATEGY FOR THE ADRIATIC -IONIAN REGION (EUSAIR) & THE ADRIATIC IONIAN INITIATIVE (AII) (1 June 2024 – 31 May 2025)

Introduction

The Hellenic Republic assumes for the second time the Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and for the fourth time the Presidency of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative (AII).

The Hellenic Presidency of the EUSAIR is launched in the midst of geopolitical challenges in the wider region. During the Hellenic Presidency, the renewal of the mandate of the European Institutions, the adoption of the new EU Strategic Compass and the preparation for Europe after 2027 will take place. In this context, the Presidency considers to take advantage of recent positive developments for the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-region, such as the progress in the course of European integration of the Western Balkans and the strengthening of the relevant funding from the EU, through the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

The Hellenic Presidency will continue the work of the previous Presidencies, responding to the existing and emerging global, European and regional trends affecting the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-region and adapting the Strategy and the Initiative accordingly, where necessary. The participation in the Strategy of four EU member states (Greece, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia) which share common views on a significant number of EU policies, underlining Enlargement and Cohesion Policy, as well as it cooperates with them in informal EU member groups, including MED-9, "Friends of Enlargement" and "Friends of Cohesion", has been taken into account when drafting the Presidency's priorities. Likewise, the Hellenic Presidency looks forward equally to the cooperation of the other members of the Strategy, Candidate countries of the Western Balkans, as well as San Marino.

In this context, the Hellenic Presidency will seek a new approach for the implementation of the Strategy in order to respond to the revised Action Plan, but also to build on good practices and successful existing methods. This includes the expansion of the scope of participants in the preparation of Thematic Steering Groups (TSGs). To this end, the Presidency expects that the Strategy will benefit from the new Governance Architecture. In this vein, Greece intends to host one meeting of each Pillar in its territory and suggests that the coordinators of the TSGs include in their agendas at least one of the issues foreseen in the revised Action Plan (see below for the indicative calendar of planned activities of the Strategy and the Initiative).

Bearing in mind the above and taking into account that economic development and job creation are among the main objectives of the Strategy, the Hellenic Presidency sets five interrelated issues as priorities:

1. EU enlargement and in particular the support to the accession process of the Western Balkans.
2. Cohesion Policy in the post 2027 period interlinked to the EUSAIR Strategy and highlighting the spatial dimension of the Strategy.
3. Green transition and the effects of climate change.
4. Blue Economy and the development of the appropriate professional skills, education and specialization in blue professions combined with the alignment of the political skills within the EUSAIR reality
5. Environmental protection and promotion of environmental quality.

Schematically, these priorities can be visualized as the vertices of a pentagon, within which actions relevant to the priorities fit and interact. (Schematic illustration).

1. EU enlargement and support to the accession process of the Western Balkans

The Strategy offers an excellent framework for cooperation in support of EU Enlargement for the Western Balkans. In this context, the Hellenic Presidency will seek:

- a) the integration of the Strategy into the wider political and economic-financial framework of the Enlargement and the European integration of the Western Balkans, as shaped, among others, by the new Enlargement Methodology, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and the possibilities provided by the Regulation of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance 2021-2027 (IPA III), the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and the Regulation for the New Economic Growth of the Western Balkans. The alignment of the flagship projects and priorities of the Strategy with the Western Balkans Economic and Investment Plan, a practice already followed in the Danube Strategy, would be to the benefit of the Strategy and its participating States.
- b) the use of the Thematic Steering Groups of the Pillars of the Strategy as vehicles for the transfer of know-how for the adoption and implementation of the *acquis* by the Candidate countries of the Western Balkans and the aligning of flagship projects of the Strategy with the corresponding chapters of the accession negotiations, in order to contribute to the progress of the latter. It is therefrom expected that the added value of the Strategy will be visible to the line Ministries of the Candidate countries, as well as to the Commission's Services.
- c) inclusion of the Strategy in the indicators of the IPA III action plans, where possible.

2. Cohesion Policy post 2027 and its linkages to the EUSAIR

The main concern of the Hellenic Presidency will be to strengthen the vision, the goal, the role and the action of the macro-regional strategies in the context of the Cohesion Policy post- 2027. The aim is to highlight the EUSAIR as a European Strategy that:

- a) was created with a view to democratic cooperation and interconnection, fair transition, development and prosperity of neighboring regions and countries, in accordance with the European vision,

b) utilizes territorial capital and empowers participating countries to deal with external crises and extraordinary events,

c) contributes to pulling together resources for the implementation of actions within the Cohesion Policy that can be integrated into any operational programme (sectoral and regional), moving beyond the Interreg framework, further enhancing networking, while maintaining the cross-border flows and people-to-people cooperation.

In parallel with the preparation of the Candidate Countries to join the EU, after 2027, the Union is also preparing itself to welcome new members, during the next decade and to function as a Union of 30+ Member States. Cohesion Policy is one of the main policies of the EU that will be primarily affected by the increase of the number of EU member states and our actions and goals are towards enabling and facilitating this process.

Interlinked with the aforementioned is the promotion, the strengthening and the enhancement of the territorial dimension of the EUSAIR macro-region. As a key parameter of the Cohesion Policy, but also as a connective tissue with the participating Western Balkans region, the territorial dimension in actions and priorities of the Strategy aims at reducing intra-regional disparities within EUSAIR, at promoting inter-regional convergence, and at the adoption of a place-based approach, as a springboard for the integrated and holistic reaction to the macro-regional area. Actions and activities at the macro-regional level will constitute the recognition and promotion of local activities according to the motto: "think locally, plan macro-regionally, act Europeanly".

The fact that the Hellenic Presidency of the Strategy coincides with a decade of implementation of the Strategy (2014-2024), imposes dissemination and communication actions at this level as well, in the context of discussions on the post-2027 Cohesion Policy.

3. Green transition and tackling the effects of climate change

The degradation of the environment worldwide, the climate change and especially the rise of the global temperature, which particularly affects the Mediterranean region converting it to a hot-spot, make it necessary to take urgent measures and change our way of life, starting with energy production.

Macro-regional Strategies are based on the need to address jointly challenges that each party/country/state/region cannot face alone. The individual measures of the countries of the macro-region may remain inadequate and incomplete until the rest of the countries of the region adopt similar or complementary measures. For example, terminating the use of coal in one country is not enough to improve the environmental quality, if similar measures are not taken by neighboring countries. Greece considers that the Strategy has the potential to contribute to the achievement of the objectives set by the EU. In this direction, Greece promotes the alignment of its strategic planning in the direction of climate neutrality by 2050, formulating the National Plan for Energy and Climate, the Long-Term Strategy for 2050, the National Climate Law, the National Offshore Wind Farm Development Program. In addition, within the EU, Greece promotes the initiative for the development of electricity networks and it actively participates in the "Green Energy for EU islands" initiative. In addition, Projects of Common and Mutual Interest (PCI/PMI) in the fields of electricity transmission and storage, hydrogen transport, intelligent gas networks and dioxide storage of coal for the implementation of the objectives of the green transition are supported by the Greek side and are included in the relevant lists of the EU. These projects have a significant positive cross-border impact and added value for the EU and are expected to contribute to energy security and the provision of clean, affordable energy in terms of sustainability. Greece also promotes priority projects of the CESEC Action Plans with specific cross-border benefits for the Adriatic & Ionian region, as well as important projects of common European interest (IPCEIs). Within the framework of the Pillars of the Strategy, these flagship initiatives can

be implemented, creating added value to the Strategy, with a multiplier effect. The primary objective of climate neutrality governs the energy policy in the Adriatic and Ionian Macro-Region. The key challenges for a sustainable energy system include both the security of supply and the diversification of energy sources, as identified by the objectives of the EU RePOWER initiative, as well as the needs related to the transformation of electricity systems to ensure sufficient capacity, the upgrading of interconnections and the technological adaptations aimed at the flexibility of the system necessary for the energy transition.

During its presidency, Greece will accelerate the debate on strengthening international energy interconnections (including RES and offshore potential). It will also facilitate the debate on the prospects for hydrogen market development in EUSAIR countries and the implementation of energy saving and decarbonisation technologies, including through examples of good practice, e.g. hydrogen valleys, major projects of common European interest (IPCEIs), projects of common/mutual interest (PCIs/PMIs).

More concretely, taking into account the revised Action Plan, the Hellenic Presidency will seek:

- a) the promotion of cross-border cooperation in the field of renewable energy sources and energy saving by exploring the possibilities of strengthening offshore blue renewable energy,
- b) the further promotion and acceleration of international energy interconnections between Greece and the EUSAIR countries, including the possible development of offshore wind farms in the Ionian and Adriatic, in accordance with the revised Action Plan,
- c) strengthening the hydrogen market development prospects in the EUSAIR countries by highlighting good practices such as hydrogen valleys, major projects of common European interest (IPCEIs) and projects of common/mutual interest (PCI/PMIs).

In order to highlight the above priorities, the Hellenic Presidency will organize a thematic event (conference) under the auspices of pillar 2 – thematic energy group.

4. Blue Economy - development of skills and expertise (blue skills)

The Hellenic Presidency will highlight the role of maritime security, as a key component of the blue economy, in the context of the promotion and implementation of Partnership Agreement programs and cooperation between countries. The safety of navigation, the improvement of safety rules for the circulation and operation of ships, the limitation of the risks of accidents that lead to loss of life, pollution of the seas and destruction of ecosystems, must be the primary objective of the macro-region. Deepening maritime security, however, also requires the cultivation of blue skills, as well as innovative approaches to the development of know-how and specialization of human capital, with the aim of creating new jobs, economic development and sustainability of the macro-region.

As an evolution of the Adriatic-Ionian Sea Basin Strategy, the Strategy has the sea and the water resources as its dominant elements. Greece, together with Montenegro, are the coordinators of the first pillar of the Strategy, the Sustainable Blue Economy, which includes the sea, coastal areas, islands and inland waters.

The Adriatic-Ionian Region is rich in natural resources and biodiversity, but at the same time vulnerable to natural disasters, overexploitation and pollution. Fisheries and aquaculture do not only contribute to the economy and environmental protection; they also have a significant social impact and cultural tradition. The Strategy aims to promote the sustainable use of natural resources and ensure controlled exploitation, to create added value. The use of innovative technologies, the strengthening of the regional market through the improvement of cooperation and the creation of "clusters", the active participation of interested parties and the interface with

the industry contribute to this. The above will contribute to an increase in production and the adoption of common environmental standards, compatible with the Community acquis, throughout the macro-region.

In this context and taking into account the revised Action Plan, the Hellenic Presidency will focus on strengthening the coastal economy, and in particular:

a) promoting actions for the development of coastal communities and the preservation of the local population. These actions include the development of port-to-market communication using digital means and the distribution of non-discarded catches, initially to the most vulnerable social groups.

b) pinpointing the lagoons as a sector of regional development with positive effects on the environment, the local economy and the socio-economic development of the wider areas.

5. Protection and promotion of the environment

In the area of environmental protection, under Pillar 3 of the Strategy, the Hellenic Presidency will promote actions related to the commitments announced at the 9th "Our Ocean Conference", hosted in Athens (April 16-17, 2024), and which will have clear benefits for the Macroregion. These actions concern: a) the creation of two marine parks, one being in the Ionian, b) the monitoring and surveillance of protected marine areas, and c) the reduction of plastic and microplastic waste. Particularly:

Marine Parks: the commitments undertaken by Greece in the field of marine water protection include the establishment during the Hellenic Presidency of two National Marine Parks, in the Aegean and the Ionian Sea, with the aim that the marine protected areas of Greece cover until the end of 2024 32% of the seas, from 18.3% today. The Ionian Marine Park, with a total area of more than 14,000 km², is particularly important for the Adriatic-Ionian Macroregion and its Environment, as the area is very important for marine mammals (whales, dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, Monachus Monachus seals), the Caretta Caretta turtles and the Posidonia underwater meadows, while in the deep waters there are coral formations. In addition, the Hellenic Presidency will work for banning of trawling (considered the biggest threat to marine habitats, as it often causes irreversible damage to the seabed), from all National Marine Parks by 2026 and from all protected areas by 2030.

Monitoring and surveillance of protected marine areas: Greece is preparing the operation of a system of monitoring and surveillance of protected marine areas. This will include tools for assessing the environmental status of marine waters, such as marine protected area mapping, a variety of monitoring techniques, digital analysis and management tools, and important area identification systems for specific protected species, such as the sea turtle. The monitoring of fishing activity in almost real time will be supported by a mapping platform, combined with Artificial Intelligence systems.

In cooperation with the other countries of the Strategy, this action can have a multiplier effect, as the Adriatic and the Ionian are ecosystems with many elements in common. The possibilities of undertaking similar actions, cooperation and the use of common data, as well as the possibility of operating a common early warning mechanism, will therefore be examined.

Reduction of plastic waste and microplastics: the Hellenic Presidency will continue the work of the Croatian Presidency. During the 9th "Our Ocean Conference" (Athens, April 16-17, 2024), Greece made a commitment to reduce plastic waste by 50% and microplastics by 30% by 2030, compared to 2019. To achieve these goals, cooperation with the other coastal countries of the Adriatic-Ionian is essential and will work to the benefit of everyone and of the region.

AII HELLENIC PRESIDENCY 2024-2025

The Greek Chairmanship of the Initiative aims to build on the good practices of the Croatian Chairmanship; In this respect, special emphasis is attributed on the protection of natural and cultural landscape, youth as the ultimate driver for sustainable development and the enhancement of connectivity as a valuable tool in bringing people closer. More specifically, the thematic priorities of the Hellenic Presidency are as follows:

A. Sustainability of Landscape, Historical Monuments & Life along the Coastline and the Hinterland

All AII countries share a common interest in the preservation and protection of the Adriatic-Ionian coastal and inland environment. In this respect, developing special interest tourism, such as Eco Tourism and Fishing Tourism, forms an important driving force for the economy of the AII macro-region.

As cultural heritage sites bordering the coastline or found underwater are often adversely affected by erosion, climate change and mass cultural tourism, protection against shore erosion, safeguard of the cultural heritage as well as damage prevention and sustainability support is deemed to be of great value.

As natural micro-environments are interconnected, collaboration and assistance in cases of natural disasters and emergencies should be intensified.

B. Youth as Pillar of the Present and Driver for the Future

As the brain drain and demographic problems have become a more prominent issue within the AII macro-region, cooperation and horizontal actions may supplement relevant European and national policies. Brain Regain and fostering Startups/Incubators & Ecosystems, particularly in regions away from large urban centers, can enhance social cohesion, welfare and inclusive economic growth. Involving key stakeholders from the spheres of academia and entrepreneurship and promoting the interconnection between tertiary education and the business community can significantly contribute to implementation of these priorities.

C. Mitigating Marine Pollution & Protecting Natural Environment

As protection of biodiversity and preservation of marine ecosystems contribute to the sustainable development of the AII macro-region, Greece pledges to encourage further cooperation in this field, especially given the importance of sustainable fishing and fish farming for the preservation of the marine environment.

Furthermore, promotion of renewable or low-carbon imprint fuels and deployment of alternative fuels by ships can contribute to the decarbonization of maritime transport. Optimization of passenger and freight transport reduces road congestion and improves access to peripheral and island regions; hence, amelioration of the entire marine and land transport and the logistic chain throughout the AII region is highly valued.

D. Promotion of Connectivity as a Vital EU Enlargement Tool

The promotion of connectivity within the Adriatic and Ionian macro-region is a vital EU enlargement tool. The Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T) are bound to improve transportation infrastructure and foster economic development and trade integration. By enhancing connectivity, the AII can bridge existing infrastructure gaps and promote smoother movement of goods and people across the region. Port-rail interconnections can address logistical

bottlenecks, in conformity with EU objectives for environmental protection and deployment of efficient transport networks. Competitiveness and investment attraction are strengthened through AII macro-region alignment with EU standards and infrastructure. This multi-modal connectivity is a strategic priority for the Greek Chairmanship of the AII.