

WHITE PAPER ON REVISION OF EUSALP ACTION PLAN

1 October 2024

BACKGROUND

In 2015, under request of the European Council, the European Commission adopted a Communication and the Action Plan on the EU Strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP). Slovenia, as a first presiding country, organised the EUSALP Launch Conference in January 2016 with the aim to (1) bring together high political representatives from all EUSALP countries, regions and EU institutions with a view to achieving a broad political consensus on the strategic orientation for implementing EUSALP and (2) to demonstrate to different stakeholders and the public the true potential of the cooperation within EUSALP.

The EUSALP Action Plan adopted in 2015 determined the path towards the new relationship between metropolitan, peri-mountain, and mountain areas, focusing on three thematic priorities – (1) Competitiveness and innovation, (2) Environmentally friendly mobility and connectivity and (3) Sustainable management of energy, natural and cultural resources.

Today, the geographical area covered by EUSALP, is home to about 80 million inhabitants. The area is concentrating at the heart of the EU with a strong network of major European metropolises, Alpine cities, villages and mountain resorts, making it one of the wealthiest, most attractive, competitive, innovative and productive regions in Europe. With its unique geographical and natural features, it represents most important water tower and one of the main biodiversity sanctuary of the EU.

Nevertheless, almost a decade since the establishment of the EUSALP, the main challenges remain and are even deepened by climate change, which has dramatically affected economic activities, lifestyles and human settlement. Also Europe is undergoing green and digital transition while facing many other challenges. The Alpine region still calls for balancing its wealth and development with natural conservation and the adoption of innovative approaches in order to further develop the area in a sustainable way and adapt it to climate change. Moreover, it still needs to strengthen solidarity between the territories in order to reduce disparities between the levels of development of the various regions.

For all these reasons, the EUSALP General Assembly Bad Ragaz Declaration of 2023 called for the revision of the EUSALP Action Plan and mandated the Executive Board to set up a specific Task Force to support the Action Plan revision process, under the lead of successive presidencies.

While calling on all Alpine states and regions, as well as on observer organizations and action groups, to actively participate in this process, the EUSALP General Assembly asked the European Commission for a revision of the Action Plan based on the outcomes of the Task Force. An interim progress report is awaited at the General Assembly in 2024 with a view to present the revised Action Plan at the General Assembly in 2025.

Based on the 2023 General Assembly decision, the Task Force for revision of the EUSALP Action Plan was formed by the Executive Board on 29th November 2023 with the mandate to assess the Strategy's mission statement and activities and for adaptation or improvement of the various documents that support these activities in line with the current and future challenges for the Alpine Region which needs to be addressed.

The Task Force met several times in 2024 and regularly informed and consulted the EUSALP Executive Board regarding the progress made.

This White Paper on the revision of the EUSALP Action Plan is the result of discussions by all actors involved – National Coordinators, Executive Board, Board of Action Group Leaders and consultations with the European Commission. It sets the main guidelines that could be followed for the revision of EUSALP Action Plan covering several issues, from the thematic focus of EUSALP, the corresponding actions, to aspects of governance, funding and cooperation, thus ensuring effective and efficient implementation of the strategy.

1. POLITICAL STEERING OF THE STRATEGY

To achieve the ambitious objectives set by the Alpine countries and regions, EUSALP's political engagement at the highest levels is essential.

The GA assumes a decisive role in setting annual and multiannual political priorities based on the recommendation of the incoming presidency, endorses, every three years, the Work Plans of the Action Groups and selects cross-cutting priorities or other joint activities between Action Groups that should focus the strategy and guide the work and cooperation of all EUSALP bodies.

The Trio Presidency coordinates actions to maintain continuity in the priorities of earlier presidencies, thereby facilitating the effective planning and implementation of activities by the involved Action Groups and strengthens the Executive Board as a coordination body.

Furthermore, the GA should regularly review and discuss the progress made on the latest priorities, fostering accountability and ownership, as well as successful implementation.

THEMATIC FOCUS AND OBJECTIVES

It is increasingly clear that the fundamental objectives of EUSALP Strategy can be achieved only by simplifying its policy message in a way that makes it recognizable and appealing to politicians, stakeholders, fund managers, and the general public.

While considering that the Thematic Policy Areas (pillars) listed in the EUSALP Action Plan remain relevant, there is a general agreement that since its adoption, profound changes have occurred in the Alpine region, which make some adjustments necessary.

Three main guidelines are taken into account when defining the thematic focus of the EUSALP Action Plan and the corresponding measures. The thematic pillars (Thematic Policy Areas) and their corresponding actions should focus on topics:

- in which there is a political and strategic interest,
- in which there is an alpine-wide overarching need/interest, and
- that can optimally and realistically be implemented in the EUSALP context.

In line with the approach suggested by the Swiss presidency with the slogan “Less is more” which we endorsed in Bad Ragaz, it is also recognized that the EUSALP Action Plan should be refocus around some main topics/actions that should be more concise and bold.

This is considered compatible with the current distribution and responsibilities of the Action Groups and could be achieved with increased coordination and focus on a reduced number of high-level goals, including through the Cross-Cutting Priorities or similar approaches.

The number of the thematic pillars (Thematic Policy Areas) should remain the same as in the current Action Plan, with only some minor adjustments in the way their objectives are formulated:

1. A competitive, innovative, circular and climate neutral economy in the Alpine region.
2. A more accessible and interconnected Alpine region that fosters sustainable transports and mobility solutions and takes full advantage of digitalization and new technologies.
3. An ecologically connected, environmentally sustainable Alpine Region that fosters climate adaptation

This thematic focus lays a clear long-term view paving the way towards an ambitious mission of the EUSALP and vision for the Alpine region, embedded in strategic priorities of the European Union.

The actions within the revised Action Plan shall support the newly proposed objectives in the most effective way. To that respect, the Task Force has considered the possibility to review the actions that are indicated in the Action Plan and implement a number of possible changes. While discussion continue among the members of the Task Force in view to reach a common position on the matter, the following changes are considered, subject to possible adjustments after further steering of the thematic orientations of the Strategy:

- The action dealing with energy (Action 9 in the current Action Plan) could be included under thematic pillar 1, given that low carbon and renewable energies are key tools for accompanying the process of greening business and markets and that production of green energy and related products is an important strategic economic factor. In fact, since energy transition measures are not only relevant for the economic sector, but they embrace additional key stakeholders, such as municipalities, regions and households that also support the energy transition, this could be also be taken into account for a final positioning of Action 9 of the current Plan.
- The action on research and innovation (Action 1 in the current Action Plan) to become a cross-cutting action relevant for all other actions;
- The focus of the action on labour market, education and training in strategic sectors (Action 3 in the current Action Plan) to become more integrated with the innovation system and strategic economic sectors in order to support the availability of skilled labour force in the strategic sectors of the Alpine Region's economic system;
- The focus of the action on natural resources, ecological connectivity as well as risk management (Actions 6, 7 and 8 in the current Action Plan) with a regard to protecting biodiversity and restoring nature shall be closely aligned with the current legal provisions.

The revision of the actions to be considered in the Action Plan for each objective is still going-on and need to be completed as soon as possible with a view to reach a consensus on the matter.

This debate is inevitably linked to the question of whether the Action Groups that are entrusted with the implementation of the EUSALP thematic objectives and actions should adapt their functioning as discussed in the following section.

2. IMPLEMENTING THE ACTION PLAN

The implementation requires a multi-level-governance approach, which must combine leadership from the top with the initiatives and expertise at the implementation level in a multi-stakeholder involvement. In order to ensure such policy coherence between the strategy's objectives and its outcomes, there is a need for strong coordination between process coordination and thematic coordination. To this end, the implementation of the Action Plan and its objectives needs to be supported by an efficient and robust structure as well as adequate financial and human resources.

For more detailed description of the role of each governance body and the relationships among them, the revised Action Plan should refer to a **Governance Architecture Paper**, a revised version of the existing EUSALP "Vademecum".

3.1 Governance

The existing governance structure and its functioning is crucial for the effective and efficient implementation of the Action Plan. In general, the focus of the EUSALP governance should be on the interface between implementation (represented by the Action Groups in the current Action Plan) and coordination level (represented by the Executive Board in the current Action Plan). This interface is crucial for the successful and effective implementation of the EUSALP; it is where the objectives meet the implementation. New effective ways of working together at this interface should be considered, including communication methods. In the revised Action Plan, different bodies of the governance structure should only be briefly described.

Action Groups and their Leaders hold an important role in implementation of the strategy as coordinators of Actions. Nevertheless, it has been observed that their structure and working method is very diverse and *partly* requires improvements or even re-shaping of their mission. To ensure the steering and quality of the Action Groups, their members should be appointed by each EUSALP National Coordinator.

Civil society organisations, which operate on an alpine-wide level, shall also be given an opportunity to get directly involved in the implementation of the strategy. This involvement shall be attained through information activities by the EUSALP Secretariat, or under conditions which will be defined, through direct participation into the work of Action Groups as observers.

The **Action Group Leader (AGL)** is the person, appointed by the institution entrusted with the Action Group Lead in charge of implementing the Action Group objectives. The implementation within each Action Group should be guided by the EUSALP Action Plan and, which should be – along with interpreting directions by the General Assembly - the basis for the development of the Action Group Work Plan. The aim of the Work Plan is to operationalize the main objectives stated in the EUSALP Action Plan through actions and initiatives that aim to achieve desired policy impact in the respective Action Group. The Action Group Work Plan play a decisive role in ensuring policy coherence between the Action Plan on the one side, and the implementation and deliverables by the Action Groups on the other side. The Work Plans are means to focus the Action Groups' operations to the directions given by the General Assembly and/or the Executive Board on the implementation of the Action Plan.

In order to have result-oriented Action Group Work Plans that reflect the ambition of EUSALP, the Work Plan should be realistic (in terms of timing and resources), focused and macro-regionally oriented; there

should be a shared understanding of the contribution of the Action Group activities to the realisation of the EUSALP Action Plan; they should ensure monitoring of the progress of the respective Action Group.

The "**Objective coordinator**" in the existing Action Plan, responsible for the thematic/pillar coordination among the Action Groups of the same priority, has in practice never really been implemented, hence should be abandoned. In order to ensure a transversal way of cooperation between different Action Groups, other instruments shall be applied and explored, such as Cross-Cutting Priorities and (annual) joint thematic pillar commission meetings or similar.

The revised Action Plan should take up two new active structures, which have developed over time: EUSALP Secretariat and EUSALP Youth Council. While a more detailed description of their responsibilities and functioning will be indicated in the updated version of the Vademecum/GAP, it is suggested that a short description of their role should be added to the Action Plan along the following lines:

The **EUSALP Secretariat** provides technical and content related assistance to the implementation of the EUSALP Action Plan, easing the communication and cooperation among the governance bodies, notably the Presidency, the Executive Board, the Board of Actions Group Leaders, the General Assembly and the Youth Council. It has a role in facilitating the implementations of the three pillars of the strategy, assisting the Action Groups, fostering capacity building measures for Action Groups, promoting collaboration and transversal cooperation between Action Groups, encouraging the involvement of the youth, supporting project development, and fostering access to funding opportunities (embedding) e.g. by animation of the financial dialogue between Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies of EU funding programmes. Moreover, the EUSALP Secretariat shall support and ease the collaboration with other Alpine entities and Macro-regional Strategies.

To ensure the visibility and the effectiveness of the EUSALP, the EUSALP Secretariat engages in dissemination and awareness-raising activities, ensuring that information about EUSALP reaches relevant stakeholders, and is committed to assist Executive Board in the monitoring of the operability and the progress of the strategy.

The **EUSALP Youth Council** provides a platform for institutional involvement of young people in all EUSALP bodies to make sure that their ideas and viewpoints are heard and duly considered. Its mission is build a bridge between youth of the different Alpine Regions and the EUSALP governance structures.

3.1.1 Cooperation with other governance structures and entities in the Alpine Region

Furthermore, references to the cooperation with the Interreg Alpine Space Programme and the Alpine Convention should be made in the governance chapter of the revised EUSALP Action Plan. The following aspects have been suggested:

Closer cooperation between **Alpine Convention** implementing bodies and EUSALP bodies is crucial in order to comply with the existing legal framework, to avoid contradictory actions and decisions and to work effectively by finding synergies and enhancing collaboration between those two structures and their working formats while avoiding unnecessary duplication.

The Interreg Alpine Space Programme and EUSALP share similar objectives and cover the same geographical perimeter. The Alpine Space Programme supports the vision and objectives for the Alpine region developed by EUSALP within the EU regulatory framework given for transnational Interreg programmes. Not being a governance body in the stricter sense, the Alpine Space Programme is of

strategic significance for the implementation of EUSALP as it supports the development of strategic projects and initiatives, be it topic – or governance-wise. Close coordination and collaboration between EUSALP and the Programme is therefore crucial for the success of both - attaining strategically meaningful projects for the programme whose results are acknowledged and taken up by the relevant stakeholders and which are spending the programmes funds efficiently and effectively for the implementation of the Strategy.

3.2 Financing

Since EUSALP, like other macro-regional strategies, does not have own funding, it has to employ the available funding mechanisms to finance the implementation of projects, which contribute to reaching its strategic objectives. EUSALP is a territorial Strategy; hence, all funding instruments with a clear territorial dimension should be taken into consideration for its implementation as well as other thematic instruments, which could be better used, in a coordinated territorial approach.

National, regional funding sources and, if applicable, EU fundings shall be directed towards the objectives and implementation of the Strategy. The situation of non-member states, which have varying degrees of access to the various European programmes, must be taken into account by these states themselves and by the Action Groups. In order to attain a strategic and significant use of public funds for the Strategy's implementation, funding instruments and the Strategy need to be better harmonized.

Since the identified strategic objectives comply broadly with the goals of the EU Cohesion policy, these instruments play a key role for the EUSALP implementation: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF - including INTERREG), European Social Fund (ESF), Cohesion Fund (where applicable). In addition, the Rural Development Funds of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), as well as EU-managed Programmes and Partnership on Environment, Climate Change, Transport and Mobility, Research and human resources development have a significant role for territorial development and for EUSALP in particular. The private sector holds an important role in complementing and leveraging public funding and therefore shall be addressed as well. For major investments, support by the European Investment Bank and their instruments shall be taken into consideration as well.

Main partners of EUSALP stakeholders in these important tasks are the Managing Authorities and Intermediate Bodies of different programmes. Therefore, a “financial dialogue” between EUSALP implementers and Programme/Fund administrators is crucial to understand and align with each other's needs. During the programming of the future funding periods, stakeholders on all governance levels shall ensure consistency between programming and allocation of funds with the Strategy to the highest possible extent, supported by the European Commission.

3. SYNERGIES WITH OTHER MACRO-REGIONAL STRATEGIES

Cooperation with other macro-regional strategies (MRS) is important for EUSALP. This allows exchange of experiences and good practices with different MRS' stakeholders, allowing creating a possibility to find synergies and share a common MRS vision. The revised Action Plan should have references to the possible modes of cooperation with other EU MRS, as EUSALP stakeholders are regularly involved in different MRS events, such as events organised by the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (and the Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries), High-level group meetings, 4 Trio Presidency meetings and MRS [and Sea Basins] events and conferences organised by other MRSs.

These events offer opportunities to discuss common MRS topics, like governance, monitoring, funding, and exchanges on upcoming political and strategic challenges. The use of these frameworks of cooperation should be further encouraged to ensure cross MRS synergies on a content related level.

The INTERACT programme also plays a central role in ensuring coherence and synergy among the MRSs through the organisation of regular coordination meetings between the MRS stakeholders on subjects of common interest.