



Thematic Workshop 4: "Increasing regional attractiveness"

Chair:

Raphaël Goulet, Head of Unit, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission

Facilitator:

Riitta Ahdan, INTERACT Point Turku

Speakers:

Blanka Belošević, Ministry of Tourism, Croatia

Soffjola Kotelli, Ministry of Urban Development and Tourism, Albania

Antonis Fysekidis, expert

Rapporteur:

Joanna Mouliou, Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy, European Commission

Background: What is a Macro-regional Strategy?

A Macro-Regional Strategy is an **integrated framework** to address common issues of EU Member States and non-EU Countries located in the same geographical area, which thereby benefit from strengthened cooperation.

This includes **challenges**, which can only (or more efficiently/effectively) be tackled through regional cooperation (e.g. environmental, or connectivity issues) and **opportunities**, where increased cooperation is of mutual interest (e.g. tourism, research, innovation, or capacity building).

Macro-regional strategies operate with no additional EU funds, no new institutions and no new legislation. Actions which will be identified in the framework of the Strategy as benefitting from a strengthened (macro-regional) co-operation, would need to be financed by EU, national or private funds. This requires more **coherence between existing funds, structures and policies**.

How the future EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region will look like?

Following a request from the European Council of December 2012, the European Commission is called to bring forward an **EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region** before the end of 2014. The new Strategy will build on the experience gained in the existing Baltic Sea and Danube macro-regional strategies, and will incorporate the Maritime Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Seas (adopted by the Commission on 30 November 2012).

After an intensive **stakeholders' consultation** across the region carried out by the participating countries and the European Commission, and taking into account the recommendations of the evaluation of the macro-regional approach (adopted in June 2013), the European Commission is proposing that the new Strategy focuses on a limited number of areas of mutual interest, where the **added value** of cooperation is clear and justified.

In its initial stage, the Strategy will be concentrated on the four following **Pillars**:

- 1) Blue Growth
- 2) Connecting the region
- 3) Environmental quality
- 4) Sustainable tourism

Objectives and structure of the workshop

This workshop will be focused on the **Pillar 4 'Sustainable tourism'**

After a presentation of the outcomes of the stakeholders' consultation by the representatives of the coordinating countries for this Pillar (Croatia and Albania), the expert engaged by the Commission will give his view on the challenges and opportunities for cooperation in the Adriatic and Ionian region.

The participants will be encouraged to reflect on the proposed **scope, priority topics** and **potential actions** in this particular Pillar of the future EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region.

What is the issue?

Although tourism is already one of the fastest growing economic activities in the Adriatic and Ionian region, and one of the principle generators of the area's GDP, the potential of the Region's rich cultural, historic and archaeological heritage is not yet fully exploited. Similarly, the concept of **sustainable tourism** - developing innovative, quality tourism products and services and making the Adriatic Ionian destination even more attractive - is not yet fully taken on board by the tourism actors across the Region. As a result, alternative and sustainable forms of tourism (eg. cultural, thermal, rural, etc.) have not yet been sufficiently developed and/or integrated in wider regional development strategies (e.g. linked to creative industries).

Intensive tourism activities are not always managed soundly and can eventually have negative effects (production of waste, pressure on water supply, impact on land and biodiversity, etc.) on the coastal, marine, and hinterland environment. By integrating sustainability approaches into their activities, tourism stakeholders will protect the competitive advantages (its intrinsic diversity, its variety of landscapes and cultures) that make the Adriatic Ionian an attractive tourist destination.

In addition, addressing **sustainability concerns** in a socially inclusive and responsible manner (quality and sustainability of jobs created) will help the tourism industry of the Adriatic Ionian region to establish links with innovation transfer networks, to innovate its products and services and to increase its quality and value.

Cooperation in the tourism sector of the Adriatic Ionian macro-region is currently fragmented. However, the net gains of a joint approach include: increased tourist flows, saving costs due to increased efficiency in promotion/branding, diffusion of new technologies and know-how, increased employment and business development, better resource efficiency and preservation of cultural heritage, etc. Working together to these ends will make the Region more attractive both for visitors and residents.

One illustrative example is the cruise sector, with a strong potential for growth, and already operating at a macro-regional level. Yet, even its full potential has not been tapped into by local economies, failing to capture its full economic benefits and chances to mitigate the possible negative effects of an intensive influx of tourists.

Challenges and opportunities

- Reducing the **seasonality of demand** and constantly innovating and improving competitiveness, in order to withstand the increasing competition of other destinations and the growing requests for travel and tourism adapted to the emerging 'experience economy' model.
- Taking up the **sustainable tourism approach** and convincing the regional tourism actors and the local communities of the interlinked sustainability-competitiveness potential for the improvement of the Region's visibility and market uptake.
- Increasing the currently insufficient macro-regional cooperation with joint actions based on the analysis of tourism trends and their potential impact, and a systematic **exchange of know-how and best practices** with the facilitation of technology transfer and innovation.
- Enhancing the **competitiveness of SMEs** that clearly need support due to limited financial resources and lack of access to market intelligence and knowledge transfer instruments.

How cooperation can help? Strategic topics/actions:

Specific **topics**, which would benefit from macro-regional cooperation, are:

Tourism routes: The further development and branding of transnational tourism routes is an excellent way to promote the diversity and the wealth of the Adriatic Ionian region. It also offers durable economic benefits as they build on local knowledge, skills and heritage assets while they could connect and promote lesser-known remote destinations of the region. This can be applied both to already established 'maritime routes' e.g. for cruising or yacht tourism, as well as less developed 'inland/hinterland routes' focusing on the rich cultural heritage or other fields of expertise such as agricultural traditions or gastronomy.

Possible actions may include: *'joint planning of transnational tourism routes', 'connecting the different transnational routes into one Adriatic Ionian macro-regional perspective', 'developing joint services and increasing macro-regional cooperation along these routes', as well as 'joint international marketing and branding of tourism products/services underpinned by the routes'.*

Diversified offers and services: Joint cooperation to diversify the regional economy (compared to other competitors), reducing the dependence of the tourism sector on the seasonal model with complementary value added products and services. This diversification of products and services can be a vehicle for attracting more and/or different types of tourists, as well as prolonging tourist seasons, strengthening 'all year round tourism' and creating more and better jobs for the Region's economy. The overall Strategy should also combine every available support for improving the quality of agricultural products and the rural environment, and encouraging tourism as a way to diversify the economy of fisheries and rural communities.

Possible actions may include: *'networks of stakeholders or locations focusing on specific tourism groups', 'strategies for promoting all year round tourism', 'development of new and customized tourist offers and services'.*

Tourism infrastructure: Investment in tourism infrastructure (including attraction sites, hospitality & service and transportation, port facilities, marinas and passenger terminals) is a necessity for the tourism sector and it results in benefits and amenities (ranging from waste water management to cultural activities) delivered also to the local communities. However there is a risk of large-scale infrastructures in a non-sustainable tourism monoculture approach that could further stress the environmental resources, thus affecting negatively the attractiveness of the Region.

Possible actions may include: *'development of concepts for sustainable infrastructure', 'networks of sustainable management of tourism areas', 'exchange of experience of balancing growing tourist demands and sustainable infrastructure development'* and promote the use of eco-labels amongst stakeholders.

Links to other Pillars

Overall the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region as a long-term Strategy presents a holistic opportunity for **increased and sustainable growth** through tourism as a shared vision among the Adriatic Ionian stakeholders and wider public audiences. Therefore the Strategy should be internally communicated across the region endorsing the support not only of regional and local authorities but also the active participation of networks of knowledge, small business, academia, sectorial associations, local communities, and civil society. In fact, promoting greater awareness and effective cooperation among all actors involved in the Strategy, training in sustainable tourism management and capacity building to enhance the participation of local communities is of critical importance.

Indeed, Pillar 4 is strongly linked to the other three pillars. Pillar 4 could be seen also as a result of the focus of the Pillar 2 ('Connecting the Region') with better intermodal connectivity to facilitate the Tourism routes component of the Strategy and Pillar 3 ('Environmental Quality') and Pillar 1 ('Blue Growth') ensuring the integrated sustainability that is sought in Pillar 4.

Some guiding questions for the discussion:

- **Would you agree with the topics identified as of macro-regional relevance?**
- **Which actions would you consider most important? Which ones can have a bigger impact?**
- **Which type of projects would fit in the scope of this Pillar? Are there any projects which can be implemented in the short term?**