

Priorities of the EUSAIR/AII presidency of North Macedonia (1 June 2025-31 May 2026)

The Presidency of North Macedonia with the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII) coincides with the 5th anniversary of country's accession to the Strategy in 2020 and the 7th anniversary of the membership in the Initiative.

It comes 25 years following the Ancona Declaration establishing the AII as “initiative for dialogue and cooperation in the Adriatic and Ionian region”, and 11 years after the Council Conclusions initiating EUSAIR with a common goal to “promote economic and social prosperity and growth in the region by improving its attractiveness, competitiveness and connectivity...and contribute to the further integration of the Western Balkans”.

In assuming the Presidency, North Macedonia will build on the positive work and best practices established by the previous presidencies. At the same time, it will aim to leave its own mark for the presidencies that will follow and act as a driving force for the cooperation in the Adriatic and Ionian Region, contributing thus for a better life for its citizens. Strengthened cooperation and constructive dialog are of outmost importance for tackling the social, political and economic challenges imposed in the recent years, which have undoubtedly affected the Adriatic and Ionian Region as well.

As the beginning of the Presidency is directly connected with the adoption of the new European Commission¹ and the related revised EUSAIR action plan, the Presidency will use this momentum to enable the most favourable environment for its implementation, and to thus use it as a important tool for further transformation of the Adriatic and Ionian Region as an area of stability, security and prosperity and the convergence of its participating EU candidate countries towards the European Union.

In achieving the aforementioned, the EUSAIR Presidency of North Macedonia will be structured around the following priorities:

Enlargement and gradual integration

The EU enlargement and the accession process of the Western Balkan countries has been in the core of the Strategy since its inception in 2014. This is largely connected to the distinct aspect of the Strategy - in comparison to the other three macro-regional strategies, five of the ten participating countries of the Strategy are candidate countries for EU membership.

Centrality of the enlargement within EUSAIR has been reaffirmed with the revision of the Action Plan, and its inclusion as a horizontal topic across all pillars and topic, reiterating thus EUSAIR's consistency with the EU enlargement policy framework and supporting instruments. Having that

¹ <https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vmn6ec3ckzul>

sad, the Presidency of North Macedonia will work on deepening EUSAIR's support for the enlargement process, complementing actions included in, but not limited to the Reform Agendas, Enlargement Methodology, Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance 2021-2027 (IPA III), Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) etc.

Taking into consideration the revised Action Plan, the Presidency of North Macedonia will put efforts to promote actions with perspective to accelerate alignment with Union values, laws, rules, standards, policies and practices within all pillars and topics where relevant and stimulate investments and reforms in the framework of candidate countries' future Union memberships.

The Presidency will focus on development of tools using the existing or planned resources in EUSAIR to support the enlargement process, including advancing of cooperation with DG ENEST to achieve better alignment and embedding in programming pre-accession funds with EUSAIR in the next Multi-annual Financial Framework. In addition, emphasis will be given to matching EUSAIR action plan objectives with negotiation chapters and identifying areas and activities where substantial progress could be achieved through knowledge and best practice exchange in short term, working towards establishing EUSAIR cooperation and capacity building model advancing enlargement.

Cross-MRS collaboration could be used as one of the forms of extended cooperation for advancing the EU accession of Western Balkans countries, having in mind candidate countries representation across different macro-regional strategies.

Advancing implementation of the revised Action Plan and importance of macro-regional cooperation

The revision of the EUSAIR Action Plan, initiated in the spring of 2022 and followed by an extensive and all-inclusive process of wide consultations at all levels has entered its final stage. With the adoption of the Communication concerning the revised Action Plan by the College of Commissioners in May 2025 and its official launch during the Annual Forum under the Hellenic Presidency, promotion of the new Action Plan will be among the priorities of the Presidency of North Macedonia. The newly introduced pillar, actions and topics will serve as a steppingstone in revised Action Plan promotion.

Thereof, the Presidency of North Macedonia will aim to raise awareness and visibility, in particular in reaching of higher political interest about EUSAIR. Furthermore, acknowledging the need to additionally empower the key EUSAIR implementers linking their mandate to the broader policy context, the Presidency of North Macedonia will make an effort to contribute to improving the governance, providing access to means and capacity building measures, leading towards more effective implementation. The revised Action Plan is ambitious, and that ambition must be matched with stronger policy alignment, improved governance, empowered implementers reaching out to regional and local stakeholders, building and strengthening stakeholder networks establishing long-term capitalising existing resources.

Considering at the same time the multi-level governance, stakeholder-based policy-making and collaborative actions envisaged within macro-regional cooperation, the Presidency of North

Macedonia will focus on more active involvement on various stakeholder in the implementation of the revised Action Plan.

Enhancing cooperation in border regions and stronger regional integration

With one-third of the population of the European Union living in border regions, which constitute 40 % of the total EU territory, the border regions play pivotal role in the EU integration process. Nonetheless, the residents of the border territories are quite often facing numerous challenges that are hampering the socio-economic development, which can be usually linked to lingual differences, cultural mindsets, lack of trust, legal frameworks and administrative systems.

With this in mind and considering the fact that vast number of border regions in the Adriatic and Ionian area stretch in non-EU countries, the Presidency will promote solutions that can contribute to removal of existing barriers and boost their economic recovery and resilience. In this regard, the Presidency will use the positive example of the ongoing activities in the Prespa region, which can be mirrored as a good practice for border obstacles removal, territorial instruments and European grouping of territorial cooperation (EGTC) for the wider Adriatic and Ionian area.

Youth engagement, skills agenda and demographic challenges to counter depopulation and enhance resilience

The demographics of the Adriatic and Ionian region is marked by aging population, labour market disbalances, social exclusion, inflow of refugees, poverty and brain drain which is largely evident among the young people. Decrease of the working age population influences the quality of life, which can be observed as one of the main reasons that trigger desire of the young population to leave the region. Persistently high levels of youth unemployment are seen as a direct consequence of the region's difficult economic context, but equally so of its outdated educational systems that fail to deliver to the needs of the labour market. Deeply entrenched regional stereotypes, a lack of awareness of other cultures, demographic changes and a youth brain drain are some of the pieces that make up this complex regional puzzle. Raising awareness about these challenges and the need for timely solutions is therefore crucial. Challenges – although of a different nature from one country to the next – confront young people across the entire region.

Aiming at securing the Adriatic and Ionian Region a more prosperous future, one of the key priorities of the Presidency of North Macedonia will be to address the problems facing the youth, who hold the key to such a future. This will build upon the existing initiatives and cooperation schemes in the Adriatic and Ionian Region.

Recognizing the gravity of this situation, EUSAIR has already made a step towards addressing the youth participation in regional decision-making processes, targeting motivated and passionate individuals with a potential to shape the future of the Adriatic and Ionian Region, through the establishment of the EUSAIR Youth Council.

The EUSAIR Youth Council is yet in the initial phase of its existence. Hence, the Presidency of North Macedonia will work to create additional impetus of youth involvement through, and beyond the Youth Council mandate, striving to integrate youth perspectives into policies and strategies with long-term regional impacts. In the time of establishment of the EUSAIR Youth Council the revised Action Plan was already in adoption process, now it is time to involve the

Youth Council and youth perspective more strongly in the implementation of Actions considering their reflection, prioritisation and input. Wider and deeper involvement of young people can lead to creation of more relevant and future-oriented policies that adapt to society's changing demands. Through participation in youth councils and similar initiatives, young people can develop leadership skills, gain experience in governance, and become active agents of change in the Adriatic and Ionian Region.

Aiming to contribute to the wider social cohesion in the Adriatic and Ionian region, the Presidency will likewise tackle diverse topics comprising the newly established Pillar 5 – Improved Social Cohesion and promote particularly the European Skills Agenda in the macro-region. In this manner, particular attention will be given to skills, as a way forward in promoting quality of life and encouraging economic and social development, as well as an alignment with the recent European Commission initiative “Union of Skills”.

Sustainable Tourism and smart growth

The Adriatic and Ionian macro-region is rich in natural, cultural, historic and archaeological resources, creating thus vast potential for tourism development, and being a significant catalyst for job creation and a driving force for economic growth and development.

After the decrease of the Covid-19 pandemic, the tourism industry across the Adriatic and Ionian area continued to pick up speed in recent years, drawing close to, or in some countries even surpassing pre-pandemic levels. On the negative side, mass tourism and overcrowding continue to put pressure on local societies within Adriatic and Ionian region. With increasing pressure for businesses to adopt responsible practices, comply with environmental regulations, reduce pollution and adhere to ethical standards, stakeholders in the tourism industry in all countries in the region are progressively recognising the importance of sustainability in tourism development.

Grasping the requirement to undertake measures and activities that reduce pollution of nature, and to likewise implement standards for protection of biodiversity, the environment and cultural heritage, North Macedonia during its Presidency will focus on encourage development of the sustainable tourism, considering its significant importance for maintaining the delicate balance between economic development, environmental protection and social equity, encouraging responsible travel. At the same time, North Macedonia will promote activities directed at diversification of the tourist offer, as a key strategy for innovation and competitiveness in tourism.

In achieving this, the Presidency will, among the other, showcase its Smart Specialisation Strategy 2021-2027 of the Republic of North Macedonia, fostering green and sustainable growth through embedding knowledge, innovation and technology, for creating high value-added products and services, competitive on international and domestic markets. By doing so, the Presidency will incentivise the EUSAIR stakeholders to develop, through new flagship projects and umbrella initiatives (e.g. the Mediterranean diet), the related value chains and other possible innovation valleys, deepening the link of smart agriculture and food with higher added value with the sustainable tourism, recognising thus the opportunities in possible synergies such as: opportunity to diversify different agri-tourism activities, as well as initiatives for inclusion of agri-tourism and production of traditional products in tourist offers (for instance, wine routes, gourmet routes, on-farm visits, and food preparation, combined with recreational, cultural and entertainment activities

in rural areas). In the same line, the Presidency will aim to reinforce the green rural development cross-cutting topic of the revised EUSAIR Action Plan, as a cornerstone for the sustainable tourism development in Adriatic and Ionian region and significant contributor for better connectivity with local society.

Under the auspices of the AII, the Chairmanship-in-office will focus on the following issues:

Enhancing EU integration, accelerated regional cooperation and trust-building as an essential element in bringing the remaining AII region closer to joining the EU

As EU is the catalyst for the region's development and for enhancing connections between countries, we must confirm of our strategic choice to act as a reliable partner in the geopolitical environment and show ownership of the process towards promoting and protecting the shared principles and values. Ownership over our challenges, values and processes is a role that the WB should further step up, at both political and operational level and strive to provide political impetus. By maintaining a strong emphasis on the EU enlargement policy, facilitation of the access to the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA III) and other EU funding mechanisms would be an essential element in aligning the remaining AII region closer to joining the EU. Bringing some of the benefits of the EU membership to aspirants' citizens even before accession, will be crucial in this regard.

Promoting human centric digital transformation through digital platforms and building secure digital environments aligned with EU standards

Digitalisation needs to be considered as a critical priority for the Adriatic and Ionian Region. Its goal should be the acceleration of the digitalisation of governments, public services and businesses which would represent an opportunity for the economies and societies to enhance the capacities of public institutions to provide efficient e-services, to improve digital literacy and increase citizen awareness of these services.

Support and shared knowledge provided from experts, in particular for digital skills development, e-government, e-procurement and e-health services, would make public authorities more transparent and accountable, reduce costs and improve service delivery for citizens and businesses, while also addressing the social dimension. As part of the AII Parliamentary dimension, efforts to facilitate cross-border digital services by aligning legislation and standards are envisaged.

Strengthening Connectivity and Infrastructural disparities between EU Member and non-EU member states that cause significant fragmentation in the connectivity fields

-Offering a framework where different levels, processes, strategies, and funds may converge and where the emphasis on territorial cooperation stimulates positive dynamics between local authorities, the private sector, and other relevant stakeholders at the local, national, and transnational level in order to enhance the regional sense of identity that goes beyond the WB. Focusing on improvement of cross-border infrastructure to better connect candidate countries to the EU internal market. Fast and efficient transport links, both within the Adriatic - Ionian region and with the other neighbouring EU Member States, and sustainable transport with further investment in rail and sea and inland waterways is crucial. The creation of these links will drive investment, facilitate regional trade and deliver sustainable economic growth, improving the daily

lives of people in the region. We need coordinated multi-level efforts on shared environmental challenges, especially on cross-cutting issues involving more organizations and institutions.

Cultural Regional Cooperation and Protection of Cultural heritage

Cultural regional cooperation plays a vital role in the protection and promotion of cultural heritage, especially in an increasingly globalized world where local traditions, languages and historical assets can be at risk. Since many regions share cultural and historical ties due to the past civilization and migration, collaborative efforts help preserve shared heritage across modern national boundaries. Cooperation through regional programs that allow scholars, artists and conservators to share knowledge and practices, could foster mutual understanding and promote cultural diplomacy. Since not all regions have the financial or technical resources to preserve cultural heritage independently, encouraging macro-regional collaboration would allow resource and expertise sharing.

Youth and demographic challenges

Aiming at securing the Adriatic and Ionian Region a more prosperous future, one of the key priorities of the Presidency of North Macedonia will be to address the problems facing the youth, who hold the key to such a future. Governments should treat youth not just as beneficiaries, but as partners and co-creators of society. Connecting youth engagement with government, especially in the context of macro-regional strategies requires structured, meaningful and sustainable pathways for dialogue and collaboration, as the EUSAIR Youth Council presents. This can be built upon the existing initiatives and cooperation schemes in the Adriatic and Ionian Region, by providing access to quality education at all levels, creating youth – specific job programs, internships, support for startup, grants, mentorship, training, civic participation etc.

Recognizing the gravity of this situation, EUSAIR has already made a step towards addressing the youth participation in regional decision-making processes, targeting motivated and passionate individuals with a potential to shape the future of the Adriatic and Ionian Region, through the establishment of the EUSAIR Youth Council. Throughout the Macedonian Chairmanship, we aim to enhance the youth dimension and interlink the new social pillar with the activities of the Youth Council.