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**MACRO-REGIONAL INTEGRATED TERRITORIAL  
INVESTMENTS:  
HOW TO BREAK OUT OF INTERREG**

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**BRIEF**



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## Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments: How to break out of Interreg

*This Spatial Foresight Brief opens up a new path to overcome the 'no-funding' deadlock that puts European Union (EU) macro-regional strategies in anguish. Drawing upon their evolution and glimpsing into their future, it argues that macro-regional strategies have come to an age where they have the capacity and experience to design their path independently of Interreg funding. In a gradually changing environment for both macro-regional strategies and Interreg, the brief looks at current macro-regional strategies' design and funding opportunities to later bring up the notion of Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments (M-ITIs) arguing why and how they can be a meaningful alternative. This brief combines the experience from the EUSBSR, today's most mature macro-regional strategy, with the concept of the Integrated Territorial Investments territorial tool, firstly introduced in the Common Provisions Regulations (1303/2013) to present an example of Macro-regional Territorial Investments. M-ITIs can become a viable and sustainable solution for the future of the macro-regional strategies, giving an answer to how macro-regional strategies can break out of Interreg money.*

*The idea of the Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments was first elaborated in the report 'EUSBSR after 2020: Governance Remastered?' (Toptsidou & Böhme, 2018), prepared for and presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum of the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea, in Tallinn, Estonia, in June 2018. The idea for Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments has been developed based on Spatial Foresight's long-lasting experience on macro-regional strategies and Interreg, including a wide range of studies and workshops on macro-regional strategies (mainly EUSBSR, EUSAIR and EUSALP), presentations at Annual Forums of various macro-regional strategies, and evaluation of Interreg programmes incl. their links to macro-regional strategies.*

### Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments: How to break out of Interreg

**The Achilles heel of the macro-regional strategies.** Interreg and macro-regional strategies find themselves in a deadlock. Albeit indeed Interreg funding eases the funding process for the macro-regional strategies, it has also become its Achilles heel, putting both into a loop of different mutual commitments. Macro-regional strategies need to comply with Interreg rules and practices, while Interreg programmes need to adjust their priorities and geographies accordingly.

**The future calls to explore new solutions.** The current interdependent solution between macro-regional strategies and Interreg seems unsustainable for the future of both. Especially in an ever-changing world where new large societal challenges and trends call for broader and holistic actions, which become less relevant for single regional programmes. Instead, larger cooperation and collective action is necessary, for which macro-regions can offer the ground.

**Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments: how to break out of Interreg.** Reinventing the wheel is not an option. Instead, key players can adjust the existing Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) tool to encourage macro-regional strategies breaking out of Interreg money. Macro-regional strategies remain flexible with sufficient funding for their continuation, while Interreg programmes capitalise on their budget and priorities without a special dedication to macro-regional strategies.

**Macro-regional strategies of tomorrow are designed today.** In a gradually changing environment, macro-regional strategies' implementation and funding approaches need to be re-designed. Not only to adjust to a more demanding and changing future, but to become a more independent and self-empowered cooperation framework of highly committed implementers. A supportive policy framework for the 2021-2027 period allows for stronger local support and implementation of territorial strategies, which could be a first test bed for the Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments tool.



## The Achilles heel of macro-regional strategies

Macro-regional strategies are cooperation and coordination frameworks that address common challenges of a defined geographical area. Currently there are four macro-regional strategies in place, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), the EU Strategy for the Adriatic Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Space (EUSALP), all having the potential to be driving forces for change and impact in the respective regions. The four macro-regional strategies are organised along different structures such as policy or priority areas, topics or actions so as to reach their objectives and sub-objectives. Macro-regional strategies have flexible timespans, flexible structures and implement shared strategic priorities through various processes, projects and actions.

The macro-regional strategies operate under the '3 NOs principle': no new funding, no new institutions and no new legislation. This means that the implementers and coordinators of the macro-regional strategies need to capitalise on existing structures and funds. So far, the European Territorial Cooperation, or Interreg, programmes have been the main funding support of the strategies' implementation, despite their own limited funding amounts (European Commission, 2019). According to the Common Provisions Regulations (1303/2013) (European Parliament & European Council, 2013), member states that participate in a macro-regional strategy, should in the relevant Interreg programme set out the contribution of the planned interventions to this strategy. To this has also helped the alignment of Interreg programmes to the macro-regional strategies, i.e. Interreg programmes having an overlapping territory with the macro-regional strategies. This allows for an easier priority identification and eventually funding allocation to macro-regional strategies' operations.

The support of Interreg programmes to the respective macro-regional strategies is twofold. Interreg programmes contribute to the implementation of the macro-regional strategies, i.e. through their dedicated priorities, Interreg programmes contribute either directly or indirectly to the objectives of the respective macro-regional strategy geography they cover. Besides this, Interreg programmes also contribute to the coordination of the macro-regional strategies, i.e. they support the governance structures of the macro-regional strategies.

Although the funding opportunities for macro-regional strategies are open to different sources, such as mainstream European Structural and Investment Funds programmes, the European programmes LIFE, Horizon 2020, national / regional funds, other programmes, Interreg, i.e. funding for the European Territorial Cooperation programmes, has until now been the main source of funding for macro-regional strategies' operations. The inexistence of own funding for the macro-regional strategies and the alignment with existing Interreg programmes has created a deadlock which makes macro-regional strategies more and more dependent on Interreg funding and support, but also less proactive in finding new means for funding their implementation.



## Macro-regional strategies and Interreg: the ups and downs of a relationship

The contribution of the relevant Interreg programmes, i.e. the Interreg Baltic Sea Region, the Interreg Danube programme, the Interreg ADRION programme and the Interreg Alpine Space, contributing to the EUSBSR, the EUSDR, the EUSAIR and the EUSALP respectively, has been considerable. These programmes contribute directly to the respective macro-regional strategies through projects that are directly linked to them, such as for example are the flagship projects in the EUSBSR funded from the Interreg Baltic Sea Region. Furthermore, Interreg programmes contribute indirectly to the macro-regional strategies through their transnational projects. Given the thematic alignments of programmes with the objectives of the macro-regional strategies, natural synergies are achieved and most of the programmes' projects contribute to different extends to the respective objectives of the macro-regional strategies (Haarich, Toptsidou, & Salvatori, 2018; Haarich, Zillmer, Böhme, Toptsidou, & Salvatori, 2018; OECD & LEED, 2017).

Support to the governance of the macro-regional strategies has also been implemented either through a dedicated programme priority to the respective macro-regional strategy support, as for example is the case for the Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme and the Interreg ADRION programme, or through the programme priority on governance, which also covers the governance support to the macro-regional strategies, as is the case for the Interreg Danube programme and the Interreg Alpine Space programme. The support of Interreg programmes to the development of the governance structures has been deemed of vital importance especially when it comes to communication, capacity building and coordination, as well as for supporting the liaison between the implementers of the strategy, but also for covering staff and travel costs, meeting costs communication activities such as the Annual Fora (Haarich, Zillmer, et al., 2018). On the contrary, this is not really the case for the Interreg programmes themselves, which overall would hardly perceive macro-regional strategies as means in achieving their objectives and targets as defined in their programmes (Toptsidou, Böhme, Gløersen, Haarich, & Hans, 2017).

What is in it for programmes to support macro-regionals strategies processes and projects? Benefits for programmes supporting macro-regional strategies are not easy to observe. Interreg programmes supporting macro-regional strategies have advantages, especially when it comes to building synergies and certain traditions in the general transnational concept of a defined geographical area (Haarich, Zillmer, et al., 2018). Macro-regional strategies can function as a strategic framework to ease the programme and thematic objectives development. In addition, they can operate as wider coordination mechanisms between different programmes, supporting the alignment of funding under a common strategies framework and establishing synergies between different macro-regional players and make the relevance of programmes' actions more visible and more obvious (Toptsidou et al., 2017). This can help programmes in elaborating better projects and implement them more efficiently, bringing eventually better programme results. High visibility and an extended outreach and audience of the programmes and their individual projects are an important outcome for programmes. In the case of Interreg programmes, macro-regional strategies enhance their visibility and their outreach. (Toptsidou et al., 2017) This has been visible in the case of the Interreg Baltic Sea Region Programme and the EUSBSR where the alignment of the programme with the macro-regional strategy increased awareness of the programme, as well as helped reaching the target group (Haarich, Zillmer, et al., 2018).



Despite the benefits of close exchange, communication and synergies, a number of challenges can be observed. Although the support to the respective macro-regional strategies is generally appreciated, it creates administrative burden to both the macro-regional strategy, as the coordinators need to adjust to and comply with different Interreg rules, reporting and requirements, as well as for the respective Interreg programmes, which put an additional workload in place to facilitate the support to the macro-regional strategies. Further to this, the Interreg support creates a comfort zone between Interreg and macro-regional strategies, which may be convenient for both, but may not be sustainable in the long-run. National and regional authorities rely more on the support of Interreg programmes, losing the motivation to increase national resources and capacities for the strategies. The same holds for the macro-regional players, which get more and more dependent on the programme and lack innovative proposals to develop further their governance. (Haarich, Zillmer, et al., 2018)

At the same time, changes in macro-regional strategies are observed, starting with the oldest macro-regional strategy in place, the EUSBSR. As their future calls for more flexible concepts, the EUSBSR is gradually moving from flagships as *projects*, its main implementation mechanisms so far, to flagships as *processes*. Flagships as projects, are short-term, have a definite lifespan, limited partnerships and rigid priorities, without offering long-term flexibility or necessarily guaranteeing funding. On the contrary, flagships as processes can be implemented through interlinked activities, such as meetings, platforms and operations, as projects. They can support a more long-term planning and priorities and broader networks and partnerships, without being bound to the stricter thematic and funding framework of the Interreg programmes. (Toptsidou & Böhme, 2018) On the contrary, the use of Interreg sources to fund the coordination and governance of macro-regional strategies is organised in the form of projects, with a short time limitation, something that contradicts the overall flexible 'process' character of the macro-regional strategies. This may also cause additional administrative burden to the macro-regional players, who will need to design these projects, report on results and expenditure, as well as a burden on the Interreg programmes, which have to make this support fit into the macro-regional project, design specific calls, do a selection process and do the final control.

Although Interreg and macro-regional strategies converge when it comes to funding, they diverge in terms of design, structure, timespan and flexibility. The latter is particularly a key characteristic of macro-regional strategies and also necessary for them to adjust to current changes. This flexibility also comes from the 3 NOs principle which allows macro-regional strategies to be directly in the hands of their implementers. Despite the flexibility they offer, the 3 NOs have often been criticised as restrictive to the implementation of the macro-regional strategies and a review of this principle has often been proposed.

The current system seems challenging for the future of both macro-regional strategies and Interreg. Not only due to the funding dependencies, but also due to the restriction of the macro-regional strategies' flexibility. This is particularly visible in today's ever-changing world where new large societal challenges and trends call for broader and holistic actions. The 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution, smart network grids, loss of biodiversity, climate change and pollution of the seas, increasing urbanisation, ageing population, anti-democratic manipulation, migratory pressures, circular economy, platform economy, increasing global tensions, neo-nationalism are only a few developments that may affect Europe, its territories and its citizens to a different extent (Böhme, Lürer, & Toptsidou, 2019). Some may accelerate the challenges and disparities between places and citizens, while others may provide solutions. However, none of the



future trends can be addressed single-handedly. Already today cooperation is rather a must and not a luxury for effective policy making and regional development (ESPON, 2017). Hence, Interreg and macro-regional strategies, not only are affected by such a changing environment, but can also play a role in the future developments.

Working with European Structural and Investment Funds to address such grand societal challenges becomes less relevant for regional programmes. Instead, larger cooperation and collective action turns necessary, where particular territorial needs and challenges are undertaken by place-based approaches. Macro-regions can offer the ground for such larger and flexible cooperation. For this, new solutions need to be explored, so that such challenges can be jointly addressed, macro-regional strategies can also still keep their flexibility and have sufficient funding for their continuation, while Interreg programmes can capitalise on their budget and priorities without a special dedication to macro-regional strategies. Reinventing the wheel would not be an option here. Instead, relevant key players can adjust existing territorial tools to encourage macro-regional strategies breaking out of Interreg money.

### **Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments: How to break out of Interreg**

Being bold, we see that the Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments (M-ITIs) can be a tool that allows the implementation of macro-regional territorial strategies by combining funding from different funding sources and promotes place-based and effectively managed and implemented policy (Toptsidou & Böhme, 2018).

The idea of the Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investment tool is inspired by the ESIF Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs) as introduced in the Common Provisions Regulations (European Parliament & European Council, 2013). According to the regulations, the ITIs are a flexible tool to implement territorial strategies in a more integrated way, allowing member states to draw funding from different priority axes of different operational programmes and increase effectiveness of Cohesion Policy (European Commission, 2014; European Parliament, Policy Department D for Budgetary Affairs, 2019). ITIs are implemented through the use of the thematic priorities and the funding coming from the regional or national or cooperation operational programmes funded by the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). Hence the funding of ITIs comes from ESIF through different operational programmes.

There are three necessary elements for the operation of the ITIs.

- First, ITIs need a territory and a strategy. ITIs address development needs of a functional area. This means that the strategy under an ITI can cover regions which can go beyond administrative borders, as long as there is a common need or issue to be dealt through cooperation and synergies. Such an approach gives the respective territories the power and opportunity to work together at a lower level on a specific strategy.
- Second, ITIs need a package of actions. These actions have to contribute to the thematic objectives and priorities of the respective operational programmes where they draw the funding from. This will help to combine funding coming from those different objectives and priorities, through ESIF, as well as have a link to the overall Cohesion Policy objectives.



- The last element is the governance structure of ITIs. The overall responsibility for the ITI will remain with the managing authority. However, intermediate bodies can be assigned for the different tasks (European Commission, 2014). Furthermore, local authorities can also play an important role in the ITI, especially as regards the selection process of prioritising projects for the ITIs (European Parliament, Policy Department D for Budgetary Affairs, 2019).

To put it simply, ITIs allow for a single pot of resources from the European Regional and Development Fund, the European Social Fund or the Cohesion Fund, drawn from at least two different priority axes of one or more operational programmes to implement common agreed actions under a single instrument, managed or assigned in most cases by the managing authority, or by designated intermediate bodies such as local authorities, regional development bodies or Non-governmental Organisations. (based on European Commission Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy, 2015)

While ITIs have so far successfully been implemented in smaller functional areas (van der Zwet, Bachtler, Ferry, McMaster, & Miller, 2017; van der Zwet, Miller, & Gross, 2014), this brief proposes that the concept of the ITIs could be implemented and tested in bigger geographical areas. Macro-regional strategies, given their functional territory can use the concept of ITIs to overcome the hurdles deriving from a lack of own funding and direct dependence on Interreg, as well as to develop a more solid governance structure of engaged players. Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments would allow the set-up of a more stable governance structure, as well as some funding for both operational and administrative activities. This would still respect the 3NOs of the macro-regional strategies, as they can capitalise on existing funding, do not require new legislation, nor new institutions, but rather ask only for a small governance restructure that will allow the implementation of the tool. For this, managing authorities of the different operational programmes would need to be convinced to dedicate part of their funding for an ITI, in this case, for a M-ITI.

### **How could the Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investments be set up?**

The following proposed steps could be taken to set up a M-ITI, based on a possible set-up of ITIs in the 2014-2020 period. In short, relevant players need to discuss the challenges and opportunities of a M-ITI in their territory, and formally agree to follow this path. Then they need to define the scope of the M-ITI and define the territorial strategy and lastly decide on the tasks and coordination to be implemented.

**Agree formally on a M-ITI.** Relevant players, ranging from regional and national authorities, EUSBSR players, managing authorities discuss the challenges and opportunities of a M-ITI in their territory, the rationale and aims and formally agree that this is the right path to follow. This formal agreement can take the form of a memorandum of understanding, a written agreement, a named covenant or a declaration.

**Design an implementation plan.** Once the formal agreement is in place, players design the implementation plan for the M-ITI. The implementation plan entails the scope of the M-ITI and defines the territorial strategy and objectives. It also links the objectives of the M-ITI with the objectives of the





operational programmes and funds from which the funding will be made available and specifies the level of financing, the involved funds and priority axes.

**Decide on the appropriate management.** Following the implementation plan, the managing authority decides on the tasks and responsibilities to be delegated among the relevant players. The budget allocated for the M-ITI covers also the management costs.

(based on European Commission Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy, 2015)

A M-ITI could cover a whole macro-regional strategy, or there could be several M-ITIs for the different specific policy or priority areas, topics or actions and objectives or sub-objectives of a macro-regional strategy. The brief will focus below on these two possible options, using the example of the EUSBSR and exploring the different possibilities, as well as benefits stemming from this idea.

### **Option 1: A Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investment for the whole EUSBSR**

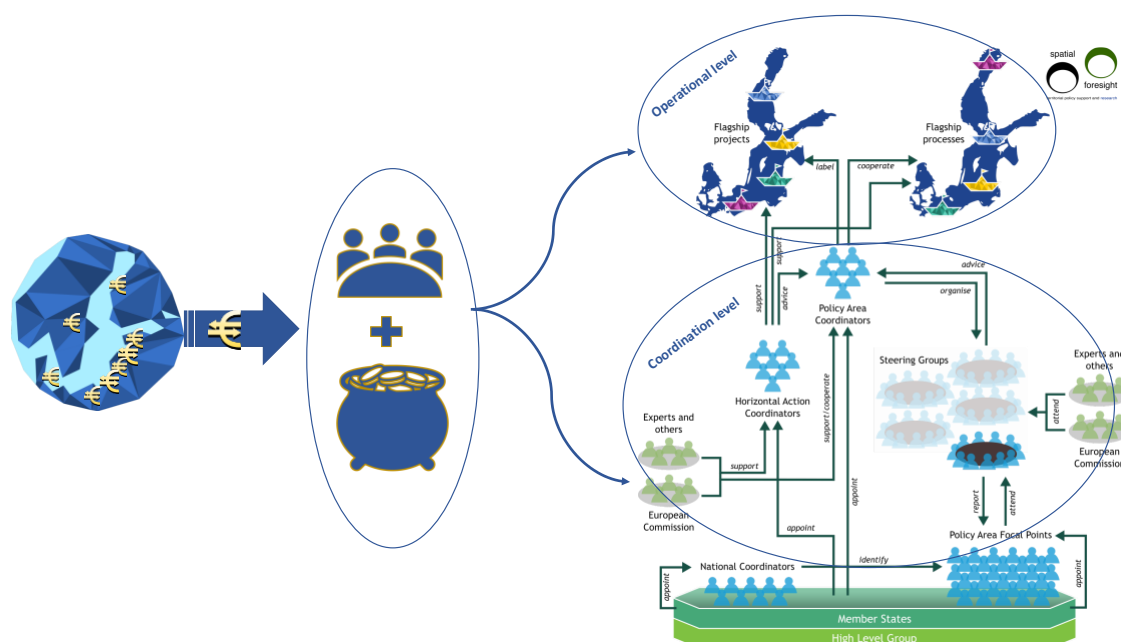
In this case, a M-ITI will cover and be set up for the whole territory of the EUSBSR.

For the EUSBSR objectives and priorities this will not have any effects. The strategy can continue with the same objectives, policy areas and horizontal actions, or can also proceed with adjustments in its Action Plan based on new emerging trends, developments and regional needs. The process of changing the Action Plan from a thematic perspective will be the same and done through discussions and agreements with the relevant key players.

For the EUSBSR governance, some small changes are to be introduced. This will more specifically mean that a central institutional body for coordination will be developed. This central implementation body, something similar to a secretariat, will be responsible for coordinating the different actions and their funding. Here, committed players are necessary. The role of the central implementation body can be taken by a group of interested and committed EUSBSR players, in agreement and after discussions with the member states, in close cooperation with the relevant managing authorities.



Figure 1 A Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investment for the whole EUSBSR



Source: authors' own, based on (Toptsidou & Böhme, 2018)

Furthermore, the M-ITI will provide some funding support, i.e. an 'own budget', coming however from the already existing and participating operational programmes, or other relevant funding sources. This will be decided through convincing managing authorities of different relevant projects in the region to dedicate part of their funding for macro-regional cooperation. This 'own budget' will be available for both funding of the flagships projects and processes of the strategy, communication activities, but also for the coordination costs of the EUSBSR's key implementers, e.g. today's Policy Area Coordinators and Horizontal Action Coordinators covering their everyday work related to the strategy.

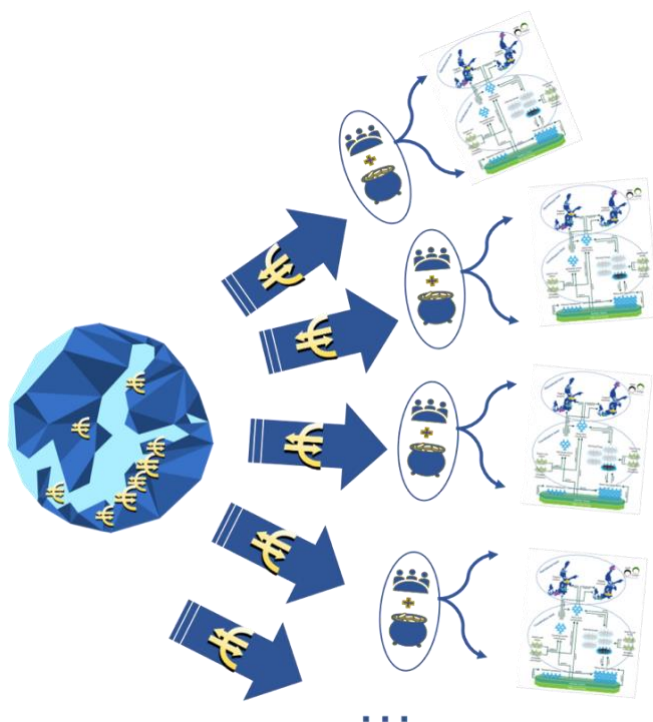
### Option 2: A Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investment for several policy / thematic areas

M-ITIs can also be applicable at the level of policy / thematic areas, instead of covering the whole EUSBSR territory. For instance, there can be a M-ITI for the objective 'save the sea', or even for the policy area 'innovation', or the policy area 'security'.

The EUSBSR objectives and priorities will not be affected in this case either. Certainly, they can remain as they are, or changed and adjusted to new and upcoming trends or regional potential and needs. EUSBSR implementers will be responsible for any new objectives or policy areas.



Figure 2 A Macro-regional Integrated Territorial Investment for different policy / thematic areas



Source: authors' own, based on (Toptsidou & Böhme, 2018)

A few changes in the EUSBSR are again to be expected. In this case, there will be a coordination body per single objective or policy area. This body can be an extended Steering Group, responsible for this policy area, where current policy coordinator members can participate, or alternatively, this role can be taken by existing policy area coordinators or horizontal action leaders.

The M-ITI will provide some funding support, i.e. again an 'own budget', coming from the already existing and participating operational programmes, or other relevant funding sources, in agreement and after discussions with the respective managing authorities. The funding will be utilised partly for the support of flagship projects and processes, communication activities, as well as for the funding of the body / bodies responsible for the coordination and the management of the M-ITI.

### **M-ITIs – an ace in the macro-regional strategies' sleeve?**

The benefits of M-ITIs vary and can be seen for both the EUSBSR's implementers, but also for the ESIF programmes, the member states, as well as the beneficiaries.

Besides making the macro-regional strategies more independent from Interreg funds, a M-ITI for a macro-regional strategy would help increase the ownership of the strategy and better involve priority area and horizontal action coordinators when it comes to the design of actions, the thematic focus and the overall coordination of the flagships and their funding. At the same time, it would ensure the



continuity of macro-regional efforts throughout a programme period, support a clear governance structure and reduce the vulnerability of the strategy as it becomes less dependent on people being appointed a role in the governance system of the strategy, and empowered with people of strong interest and commitment.

ESIF programmes on the other hand, can, by contributing to a M-ITI, easier demonstrate that they fulfil the requirement set out in the regulations to support a macro-regional strategy. Furthermore, this can reduce the administrative costs for the programmes, as for instance no additional actions need to be taken to specially consider funding applications of macro-regional relevance or to find arrangement for the alignment of funding within a macro-region. In the example of the Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme, the funding earmarked for the EUSBSR related projects and governance support could be turned into a contribution to the M-ITI, implying a simplification and reduction of administrative costs for the programme.

Through a M-ITI, authorities in the member states can reduce their pressure for ensuring a smooth governance of a macro-regional strategy, e.g. making staff resources available to various functions in the governance system of a macro-region (e.g. priority area or horizontal action coordinators or focal points and steering group members). A M-ITI can also eventually increase the ownership and commitment of key implementers, as it will demonstrate that this way member states take their contribution and support to the strategy more seriously.

Projects' and processes' beneficiaries can also see some benefits from a M-ITI implementation. First, an administrative simplification and lower administrative burden during the application process is expected, as there will be no need to apply on the one hand for funding and on the other hand for the macro-regional labelling as both can be combined in one application to the M-ITI. In addition, for projects going beyond Interreg, there will be no need to try to piece together funding from different programmes where an action does not fit the geography of a single European Structural and Investment Funds supported programme.

Certainly, implementing a M-ITI is not an easy task, nor can automatically solve all challenges macro-regional strategies face today. Going hand in hand strong cooperation and commitment, it is a rather innovative tool that can open up a new path to overcome the 'no-funding' deadlock that puts macro-regional strategies in anguish. M-ITI can become a viable and sustainable solution and provide a new possibility to explore in the future.

### **The macro-regional strategies of the future are designed today**

Macro-regional strategies are all but static. Given this, different alternatives could be proposed for the future governance and organisation, ranging from adjusting its thematic priorities to emerging global, European or macro-regional trends to capitalising on existing sources from national or regional European Structural and Investment Funds programmes. This brief proposed an innovative and disruptive idea, which builds upon existing funding and existing regulation to use for both the implementation and the coordination of macro-regional strategies.



The key to all these solutions, though, is to keep the key implementers of macro-regional strategies committed and with a strong ownership of the strategy. M-ITIs can offer significant flexibility, though this will require strong cooperation among the different players to ensure smooth implementation. Even stronger political commitment is also necessary to convince operational programmes managing authorities to dedicate part of their operational programmes' resources to a M-ITI, together with an adequate policy framework that will allow this endeavour.

The Common Provisions Regulations for 2021-2027 further support the local initiatives and sustainable urban development driven by urban, local or other territorial authorities (European Commission, 2018). More specifically, they allow the benchmarking of 6% of the ERDF resources at national level to sustainable urban development in the form of community-led local development, integrated territorial investments or any other territorial tool under policy objective 5 (COM(2018) 372 final, 2018). The new policy objective 5 of the Common Provisions Regulations on 'a Europe closer to citizens' fosters the sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives and territorial strategies under policy objective 5 endorse community-led local development and integrated territorial investments (COM(2018) 372 final, 2018). Hence, ITIs remain in the regulation for the next programming period and provide the necessary policy support for initiating, testing and implementing the idea of the M-ITIs.

The future of macro-regional strategies is unknown; however it is up to their key implementers to shape it. Macro-regional strategies have come to an age where they have the capacity and experience to design their path independently of Interreg funding and build upon their flexible structure without being restricted by Interreg regulations. In a gradually changing environment for both macro-regional strategies and Interreg, macro-regional strategies' implementation and funding approaches need to be re-designed. Macro-regional strategies of tomorrow are designed today, not only to adjust to a more demanding and changing future, but to become a more independent and self-empowered cooperation framework of highly committed implementers.



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