

Meeting of the EU MRS Transport Coordinators

1-2 February 2023

Thon Hotel EU, Rue de la Loi 75, B-1040
Brussels, Belgium

Summary report

MRS added value

EU macro-regional strategies (MRS)¹ were initiated by the political leaders of the countries and regions in Europe, aiming to address shared challenges that could not be dealt with sufficiently by a single country or a region. As a strategic policy framework, MRS offer a space for collaboration and coordination of efforts across countries and regions of Europe for a long-term impact/ change. To do it, MRS address challenges from a cross-sectoral perspective; engage relevant stakeholders; initiate, coordinate and support implementation of concrete actions (including projects) and align relevant resources to transnational work (incl. financial, institutional, human, and legislative).

MRS strength and uniqueness are in their capacity to implement core European political initiatives across the entire macro-region, aligning and coordinating them with regional and local initiatives. MRS bring Europe closer to its citizens by bringing a territorial dimension to the green, digital and social transition, including elaborating solutions to the most urgent situations, like the pandemic and war in Ukraine. MRS can be further exploited in supporting the EU enlargement process².

Background

All MRS have selected transport as their thematic priority, and while the implementation context and process differ, there is much potential for cross-MRS learning and development. Therefore, Interact Programme, in close collaboration with the EUSDR Priority Area 1B “Rail, road and air links” coordinator, proposed a meeting of MRS Transport Coordinators.

The meeting of MRS Transport Coordinators had two main objectives:

¹ There are four EU macro-regional strategies endorsed by the Council: EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, EU Strategy for the Danube Region, EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region and EU Strategy for the Alpine Region.

² Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, 9.12.2022 COM(2022) 705 final

- To provide the space for open and informal exchange on MRS implementation and governance progress, practices and approaches, successes and failures.
- To exchange suggestions on further practical cross-MRS collaboration and enhanced recognition of MRS implementation.

Core points highlighted during the meeting

Day 1 of the meeting was dedicated to exchanging experience and sharing thematic area governance and implementation issues as well as potentials for cross-MRS collaboration. And the Day 2 was focused on discussing the role and place of MRS in the European policy landscape. MRS Transport Coordinators with DG MOVE and DG REGIO representatives were exchanging on the potential for better coordination between the MRS and Commission services. The following points below present the main conclusions from both meeting days.

- **MRS lack recognition and visibility at all EU policy levels, in the EU and home country/region administration.**
It challenges the efficiency and implementation of the MRS overall, especially coordination efforts by MRS thematic coordinators. There needs to be more recognition of the function from the hierarchy (e.g., ministry) and proper staffing for the coordinator's role. Two elements can boost this: pressure from the MRS national coordinators and support from the EU Commission, highlighting MRS in their narrative. Besides, it was suggested that a reference to MRS by the Commissioners and high-level representatives in their visits/speeches would also contribute to the visibility of MRS.

The question of “Where the MRS stands in the EU policy context?” was raised.

- **MRS shall ensure continuity and sustainability of MRS governance and implementation work**, including MRS coordination and work with strategic projects.
 - a) A Thematic Area steering group is a platform where macro-regional coordination happens. However, thematic coordinators are challenged with a complete representation of all countries and regions in these groups. Danube Strategy Point suggested two documents that may give additional ideas to address the concern on low representation and engagement of relevant stakeholders in the MRS thematic areas ([EUSDR Needs assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups](#) and [EUSDR Needs assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and relevant stakeholders](#)).
 - b) Work with projects differs depending on the institutional setup and priorities of the involved institutions in coordinating the thematic areas.
For example, EUSALP has developed a project labelling procedure ([Assessment Methodology for Individual Projects](#)). Action Group 4 (Mobility) organises an open call for project ideas to identify projects with relevance for fostering sustainable mobility solutions in the Alpine Region from a macro-regional perspective. Based on the assessment criteria, projects receive a label – recognition of their strategic relevance, helping to demonstrate the strategic relevance of the initiatives in their negotiations with donors. However, the Action Group does not have a methodology to follow up on the work of projects after the labelling process. For some thematic coordinators, the main focus is on policy coordination and not too much project implementation. However, all agree that projects with strategic relevance for MRS help to show concrete results and present macro-regional impact.

- **MRS strengths** that can be further utilised and exploited are:
 - a) Transnational nature of MRS work - a principle and an approach in the MRS thematic coordinator's work. Thematic Area is governed and implemented transnationally, which adds specific requirements and demands to the macro-regional work, and allows them to act on behalf of a wider region (being ambassadors of the macro-region).
 - b) Capacity to mobilise a macro-region: like, promote, support and implement projects of strategic importance (pilot solutions); use MRS steering groups as forums to discuss and coordinate countries'/ regions' positions, e.g. legislative or other proposals; MRS framework can be employed for more efficient EU policy implementation (e.g. implementation of the EU Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy or coordination of eFTI implementation).
 - c) MRS thematic areas provide space and a place to share experiences and support preparations for EU membership.
 - d) Being an interface between the EU and national or regional level policy, MRS can highlight issues that are not visible either from the EU or national or regional perspectives.
 - e) DG MOVE representatives highlighted that MRS added value is not only to address macro-regional challenges from a cross-country/region context but also from a cross-policy perspective. Cooperation across thematic areas of the MRS is an asset, opportunity and advantage that the EC services can utilise.
 - f) As an open and informal coordination framework, MRS can be used to connect easily with relevant international, national, regional and local stakeholder groups.
 - g) Capacity to contribute to EU-level events and activities by sharing macro-regional examples (approaches, projects, collaboration processes); also to provide a coordinated response to recent developments.

- However, to further exploit the MRS framework and its unique opportunities, the **following additional challenges need to be addressed**:
 - a) MRS thematic coordinators must be seen and approached as cooperation partners in the EU processes and activities as well as at national and regional levels.
 - b) Further efforts are needed to bring higher visibility to MRS activities by, e.g., highlighting MRS and MRS initiatives at EU policy events;
 - c) MRS thematic areas are designing, supporting and promoting projects to address macro-regional challenges; however, there are limited opportunities for thematic coordinators to promote and support such strategic projects and ensure the needed funding.
 - d) Further efforts are needed to ensure continuous and regular collaboration between the European Commission services and MRS Transport Coordinators.

- MRS coordinators and DG MOVE colleagues exchanged **further practical collaboration proposals, needs and expectations** for further consideration. Communication and collaboration between Transport Coordinators and DG MOVE colleagues responsible for TEN-T corridors is a two-way process.
 - a) MRS could support DG MOVE investment initiatives by linking to other policies (e.g. policies addressed by other thematic areas of MRS), such as environment or energy, and demonstrate to countries and regions of the macro-region why investments in transport infrastructure are important (show the economic "spill-over effect").

- b) DG MOVE could benefit from MRS stakeholder networks and well-functioning cooperation links in Western Balkans to support the expansion of the transport core corridors to non-EU countries.
- c) MRS could support DG MOVE in streamlining individual project efforts into a consolidated overview of solutions developed in the macro-regions, thus through regional projects helping to connect EU policies to actions on the ground. MRS could serve as an entry point for project overview.
- d) MRS provide a factual basis and consolidated input from countries regarding specific topics, such as waterway networks. As mentioned above, MRS strength is in its capacity to contribute to EU-level events and activities with macro-regional examples.
- e) MRS coordinators could participate in the TEN-T Corridor forums and bring a macro-regional dimension to these forums (beyond TEN-T/covering missing links/providing status quo and positions of MRS), in this way, complementing both frameworks.
- f) MRS Transport Area steering groups and events would benefit from direct EU policy updates and direct exchange with TEN-T transport coordinators; therefore, appointing a permanent DG MOVE representative to the Transport Area steering groups was requested.
- g) Appointing a contact person in DG MOVE for MRS matters would significantly support exchange and collaboration. Nevena Gavalyugova-Bolsi, DG MOVE (nevena.gavalyugova@ec.europa.eu) was proposed to take this role.

There are undoubtedly several mutual benefits for closer cooperation between DG MOVE and MRS Transport Coordinators, though more specific discussion per MRS might be needed in this context. Further efforts are needed to expand the collaboration and involve DG NEAR in the MRS work.

- **Potentials for cross-MRS cooperation and coordination.**

- a) The meeting concluded with a potential for Transport Coordinators to consider joining forces in organising annual/bi-annual thematic forums; however, financing such joint events remains an open question.
- b) Besides, MRS Thematic Coordinators discussed a suggestion to organise a cross-MRS session on transport and energy during the MRS WEEK 2023; further exchange on it is needed.
- c) It was also thought to organise a cross macro-regional transport conference in Brussels, Belgium, in two years' time. Also, this proposal remains open for further reflection by the Coordinators.

The meeting provided a good place for bringing together MRS Transport Thematic Coordinators, DG MOVE and DG REGIO. Several urgent concerns were raised, ideas were exchanged, and some agreements were made. However, cross-MRS collaboration in transport requires consistent and continuous engagement and interaction by the Thematic Coordinators and DGs, and with the support of the MRS secretariats also participating in the meeting. Potentially, the collaboration efforts between both sides could be summarised in a more formalised commitment paper, highlighting expectations and commitments and setting the framework for practical cooperation. Interact Programme, within the scope of its responsibility, is available for further cross-MRS discussions and developments.