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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on the revised Action Plan of the EU Macro-Regional Strategy for the Adriatic and
Ionian Region**

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Revised EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region Action Plan

(version 5 March 2025)

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List of abbreviations

EU	European Union
EUSAIR	EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ICZM	Integrated Coastal Zone Management
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
MSP	Maritime Spatial Planning
REMPEC	Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Response Centre for the Mediterranean Sea
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
TEN-E	Trans-European Networks for Energy
TEN-T	Trans-European Networks for Transports
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

I Introduction

The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region is a macro-regional strategy adopted by the European Commission and endorsed by the European Council in 2014. The original Strategy was jointly developed by the Commission and the Adriatic-Ionian region countries and stakeholders, which agreed to work together on the areas of joint interest for the benefit of each country and the whole region.

The participating countries include four EU Member States, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, five EU candidate countries, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and one non-EU country, San Marino.

The objective of the Strategy is to promote effective multilevel and cross-sectoral cooperation for an economically prosperous, socially inclusive, well connected, more integrated, green and liveable Adriatic-Ionian region. The participating countries agreed on areas of mutual interest with high relevance for the Adriatic-Ionian region, covering both joint challenges and joint opportunities.

The action plan helps the Strategy to go from 'words to actions' by identifying the key priorities for the Adriatic-Ionian region. The first action plan was agreed in 2014 when the Strategy was launched. Since then, new priorities, challenges and opportunities have emerged – which need to be addressed through joint actions in the Adriatic-Ionian region – the process of the revision of the action plan started in January 2022. This revision of the action plan takes into account the priorities set in the UN Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals, EU policies supporting green and digital transition as well as building just and inclusive Europe on the principles of European Pillar on Social Rights; the changed circumstances and perspectives of EU enlargement; enlarged membership in the Strategy revision as well as experience concerning the capacities of the Strategy community in putting the Strategy into practice.

The participating countries have set the goal to facilitate the accession process through the revised action plan and following this, unlock the full potential of the Adriatic-Ionian region. Joint actions comprise building networks, offering mutual learning, striving for harmonisation, aligning policies, building capacities, strengthening civil society and voluntary service, to highlight some examples. The revision of the action plan has been subject to an open public consultation, helping to draw lessons from the experiences and inform the proposals of the revised action plan. The action plan outlines the way for all involved stakeholders to cooperate on specific topics, priorities and actions to achieve the objectives of the Strategy as a whole and in particular those of the pillars. The drafting process involved a wide range of stakeholders from the Adriatic-Ionian region representing national, regional and local authorities, but also the private sector, academia and civil society. The revised action plan is therefore a multilevel approach where the role of the governance system of Thematic Steering Groups of the Pillars and the Governing Board played a very crucial role, from the drafting of the Plan up to its implementation.

The implementation of the action plan is the responsibility of all, at country, regional, and local/municipal level, within each participating country. The governance system oversees coordination, monitoring and implementation. The Governing Board is the main decision-making and coordinating body, providing strategic guidance for the implementation, monitoring the progresses

achieved, evaluating the results, and adjusting the Strategy to new challenges. National coordinators ensure an effective link in each country with the relevant bodies involved in the implementation of the Strategy. For each pillar, a Thematic Steering Group, composed of appointed representatives of participant countries will work closely with their counterparts in the other countries. To ensure even stronger commitment, the Strategy governance's architecture has been revised, better defining the roles and responsibilities and improving coordination between the strategic, thematic and operational level of the Strategy as well as strengthening the involvement of regions, local administrations, academia, research, economic actors, civil society and other stakeholders in the Strategy's implementation. The Strategy Facility Point, the Stakeholders Engagement Point and the Strategic Project Development project act as a technical structure providing assistance and support to the Governing Board, the Thematic Steering Groups and the relevant stakeholders, each with its functions.

The Thematic Steering Groups have pillar coordinators to ensure an effective implementation of the actions included in each pillar. This involves securing agreement on an implementation plan associated to a timetable and a list of indicators for monitoring and evaluating progresses achieved, and ensuring close contacts between project promoters, programmes and funding sources. This work aims at being transnational, inter-sector and interinstitutional.

1.1 Aim of the revision

Starting point of the revision process was the political mandate expressed in the Izola and Tirana Declarations, the findings of the Strategy evaluation, relevant Commission reports, experience of the participating countries, the proposals of Thematic Steering Groups and stakeholders and the outcomes of the public consultations. The Sarajevo and Šibenik Declarations, signed during the revision process, were even more specific, welcoming the fifth, social pillar in the Strategy, highlighting its importance in helping regions to adjust to ongoing demographic, industrial, and geopolitical challenges, acknowledging the need for stronger mobilisation of funds and appropriate monitoring tools to evaluate impact of the Strategy and emphasising regional cooperation and integration in equal opportunities, empowerment of women, youth engagement and UN Sustainable Development Goals. On this basis, the action plan has been revised to adapt to the changes in its membership and to respond better to current challenges and opportunities.

The revision process made it possible to better align the Strategy and envisaged actions with EU priorities and strategies, shared management funds e.g. cohesion policy funds, Common Agricultural Policy funds, European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, Interreg, etc.) as well as EU direct or indirect management funds such as IPA Funds, Horizon Europe, Life, Erasmus+ etc. The Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and other targeted Western Balkans investment plans or instruments were also considered. As a result, the revised action plan targets a mid-term future of 2030.

In light of these aims and time horizon, the existing pillars of the Strategy have been revisited, adjusted and supplemented with introduction of one more pillar. This has resulted in the following, pillars:

- **Pillar 1 – Blue sustainable economy** addressing the need to strengthen emerging technologies and innovation in the field, as well as sustainable fisheries and aquaculture and progress on joint actions in the field of maritime and marine governance and services. The

focus goes beyond the immediate marine and maritime areas; it also involves inland water resources such as rivers and lakes.

- **Pillar 2 – Connecting the region** addresses the need to strengthen and interlink sustainable energy and transport networks and services in the region, reducing bottlenecks and developing necessary regulatory frameworks. Coordinated monitoring of maritime traffic and multi-modal transport and energy services will increase region's competitiveness. The focus goes beyond the major energy and transport infrastructure networks; it also involves urban nodes of the region in order to reconcile their economic and demographic growth with environmental sustainability and people accessibility to services and innovations, particularly in suburban and rural areas. A particular emphasis is given to the need to also progress on the transition to green (carbon neutral and zero pollution) and digital solutions.
- **Pillar 3 – Environmental quality** sets out actions to improve the marine and coastal environment and transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity, by further strengthening the development and use of common platforms and tools for data exchange and joint monitoring, supporting cross-border and transnational aspects of Integrated Coastal Zone Management and Maritime Spatial Planning, strengthening the exchange and dissemination of experience and the development of new innovative solutions for climate change resilience. The environmental consequences of climate change need to be reflected in the shift of risk perceptions to extreme weather conditions, ecological disasters, loss of biological diversity, natural disasters and failure to mitigate climate change. Climate change with special regards to adaptation and nature conservation is determining the scope of work of this pillar. Environmental and climate change risks have to be recognised and included in everyday activities.
- **Pillar 4 – Sustainable tourism** takes into consideration all the key dimensions of economic, environmental, cultural and social sustainability. The focus includes the digital and green transition of the tourism ecosystem considering relevant sectors and different public and private actors. It also promotes innovative ways for developing sustainable tourism. The overall objective is to develop the full potential of the region in terms of innovative, sustainable, responsible and quality tourism. Diversification of tourism products and services, along with tackling seasonality, will boost business and create jobs.
- **Pillar 5 – Improved Social Cohesion** promotes social progress concerning labour market opportunities for the whole society and for future generations. In doing so, it promotes the importance of the European social model, and of solving social challenges that transcend national borders. An important focus is on skills, education and youth. The aim of the social pillar is to align the Adriatic-Ionian region with the EU strategies and policies for strengthening focus on social change, and pair the green and digital transition with social transition. It contributes from the macro-regional context to achieve equal opportunities, empowerment of women, youth engagement, upskilling, reskilling, and access to the labour market, as well as fair working conditions and social protection in the whole region. Cooperation between participating countries may inter alia include exchange of experiences, coordination of policy measures, definition of priorities and standardisation of approaches to solving social challenges that transcend national borders. The social pillar will also work as a response to the requirements of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and it will also tackle the human rights dimension of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans.

While the first four pillars are further developed based on the past action plan, the fifth, Social Cohesion pillar has only been decided upon in May 2023. Therefore, its content will be further developed and detailed.

The **action plan revision process** took place between January 2022 and July 2024. The revision process was led by relevant Presidencies (Albania from January to May 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina from June 2022 to May 2023 and Croatia from June 2023 to May 2024) supported by the Facility Point and included a wide range of relevant stakeholders of the Strategy community. Pillar Coordinators and members of the Thematic Steering Groups for each pillar, the Governing Board and National Coordinators were involved. A specific Revision Working Group has been established by the Governing Board, with representatives of each participating countries appointed by National Coordinators. The group provided guidance to the Facility Point and approved the work done at each step of the process.

The revision process also included moments of consultation, where stakeholders other than those directly involved in the Strategy were asked to provide inputs and comments.

The most important steps and milestones of the revision process were:

- The first draft of the roadmap (January 2022)
- Engagement of an external expert that facilitated the revision (February – March 2022)
- M1: Agreement on the process (February to November 2022)
- Launch of Strategy-level public consultation with key stakeholders and interested general public including youth (May – June 2022)
- Strategy-level public consultation report published (September 2022)
- Establishment of a Revision Working Group (October/ November 2022)
- Launching of the internal Strategy consultation phase on the relevant Strategy levels (October 2022-January 2023)
- M2: Agreement on the action plan pillars, topics, structure, governance (February-May 2023)
- Second round of thematic consultation (March-June 2023)
- M3: 1 Draft action plan (June 2023)
- Gathering feedback from regional, national and Commission levels (July-September 2023)
- Final round of internal Strategy consultation (February 2024)
- M4: Input document for Commission action plan Staff Working Document (May 2024)

I.II Horizontal & cross-cutting topics

The pillars are highly interrelated due to the broad and interdisciplinary nature of the challenges and opportunities addressed by the Strategy. Therefore, the Strategy encourages an integrated or transversal approach highlighting interdependences between its pillars.

Accordingly, the revised action plan identifies horizontal and cross-cutting issues that should be addressed appropriately under the respective pillars and integrated when appropriate into the actions implementing the action plan.

The following **horizontal topics** need to be addressed by all pillars and topics:

- **Enlargement.** The enlargement of the EU to include the Western Balkan candidate countries is a central development feature in the region. The Strategy is consistent with the EU

enlargement policy framework. All pillars and all their topics, where relevant, must support the enlargement process of the candidate countries in the Adriatic-Ionian region and complement their Reform Agendas by accelerating their alignment with Union values, laws, rules, standards, policies and practices (*'acquis'*) through investments and reforms as part of their work to become EU members. The candidate countries should accelerate their economic integration and foster their progressive integration into the EU, in particular with respect to socio-economic convergence with the EU and the EU single market. The implementation of the Strategy builds on the substantial investments and reforms through the Economic and Investment Plan and the 'New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans', to assist the Adriatic-Ionian region in implementing reforms for sustainable economic growth, regional integration, and the Common Regional Market. The revised action plan is fully compatible with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, notably regarding climate action, including decarbonisation, energy and mobility, as well as its strong focus on digitalisation. It is also aligned with the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, in particular with the focus on regional energy integration and diversification towards renewable energy. Simultaneously, it aims to accelerate the region's transition to green economy. Chapters 22 (regional policy) and 27 (environment) of the *acquis* have pivotal roles in guiding the Western Balkans' efforts towards sustainable growth. The implementation of these chapters requires significant administrative capacities, including at the local level responsible for the implementation of large parts of the *acquis*, and strategic planning that the Strategy will help to develop. The Strategy will thus complement the negotiating framework and the other non-financial and financial instruments deployed by the Commission to accompany the candidate countries towards membership.

- **Capacity building.** Administrative capacity at all levels, governance and the involvement of civil society in policy making are preconditions for economic and social prosperity and cohesion. Therefore the revised action plan builds on a coherent set of targeted priorities prepared by each participating country, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including partner countries' local and regional representative bodies and authorities, social partners and civil society organisations. All pillars and all their topics, where relevant and necessary, must contribute to capacity building and to the quality of governance in the region. In particular, policy coherence for sustainable development must be taken into account in order to allow for the five pillars to be carried out in a mutually supported and integrated way.
- **Research, innovation and development.** Future oriented development requires research to generate knowledge and innovation to translate innovations into new products, markets, and services. The revised action plan is designed to align science and research in the candidate countries with European Research Area, promoting Open Science by granting Western Balkans partner countries' researchers' free access to the research publications. By these measures the Strategy will aim to improve candidate countries' places in the European Innovation Scoreboard and support innovative SMEs and start-ups to take-up the potential of the green and digital solutions. All pillars and all their topics, where relevant, must contribute to strengthening research and innovation and link actions to relevant national and regional smart specialisation strategies. This should be done through better and stronger cooperation between national and regional governance structures responsible for smart specialisation strategies. This networking and coordination should widen research and development and innovation potential and help to achieve a critical mass within the Adriatic-Ionian region,

transforming the existing value chains and creating new ones as well as enabling steeper progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The Strategy does not have its own financial resources and funding for actions and projects; it has therefore to come from existing financial instruments, including, among other programmes, Horizon Europe. In the context of the Horizon Europe work programme 2026-2027, the Strategy will seek the inclusion of specific actions for the region to strengthening innovation ecosystems in the region, supporting circular economy and biodiversity conservation, as well as promoting research and innovation in blue and green technologies. To be noted the specific impact of the European Research Area in the alignment of science and research in candidate countries.

In addition to the above topics, climate change and the green transition to a carbon-neutral and resilient Europe are widely considered by all pillars. They are of particular importance as the region – and especially the Western Balkans – is most heavily affected by the impact of climate change, as it might face considerable and higher than elsewhere in Europe increases in temperature. Estimations suggest temperature may increase by 1.7 to 4.0 °C, and even exceeding 5.0 °C by the end of the century, depending on the global effort in greenhouse gases emission reduction.

The revised Strategy fully aligns with a human rights-based approach, as well as mechanisms and instruments that ensure gender mainstreaming and equal opportunities, and will aim to further intensify the efforts undertaken by the authorities towards further consolidating, protecting, and promoting equal opportunities and gender equality. Compliance with these principles requires involvement and consultation of a wide group of civil society and equality bodies advocating for people with disabilities, persons of migrant background or of marginalised group such as Roma, gender equality bodies, etc. to ensure equality mainstreaming of all pillars and topics. The European Pillar of Social Rights on Gender Equality, as well as the EU gender equality strategy 2020-2025, the EU Pay Transparency Directive and the EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence are to be considered by all pillars, topics and actions. All activities that contribute to the objectives and targets of the revised action plan must be in accordance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. This ensures compliance with the principles of gender equality, equal opportunities, and suppression of discrimination. Actions and topics within the Strategy will be encouraged to include activities that specifically address issues of gender equality and the inclusion of marginalised groups.

Cross-cutting topics could have been thematic pillars in their own right but they were found to overlap with the existing pillars. Therefore, these topics have been identified as cross-cutting as they are to be addressed by several topics of the pillars. These topics are:

- **Circular economy.** The green transition implies implementing circular economy approaches in a wide range of sectors and places. This requires focus on connecting (national/regional) circular economy entities responsible for national/regional coordination in participating countries, searching for synergies in achieving EU policy goals. Good practices present a useful source of information for capacity building and exchange of experience between participating countries but are not enough. The involvement of national/regional stakeholders this would support matchmaking and development of value chains in the entire region and encourage uptake of EU initiatives related to circular economy in Western Balkan countries.

This topic concerns in particular pillar 1 with focus on green & blue technology reducing human impact on environment and waters, pillar 2 with focus on renewable energy, and pillar 4 with focus on sustainable and green tourism.

- **Green rural development.** Rural areas are an important part of the Adriatic-Ionian region; they underpin a wide range of economic and societal activities and are often home to natural and cultural heritage. In line with areas of action of Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas this topic is addressed by pillar 1 with focus on sustainable fisheries and support to local communities, pillar 2 with focus on sustainable energy production also in rural areas and sustainable mobility in rural areas, pillar 3 with regard to the management of the environment in rural areas and sustainable agriculture practices, pillar 4 with focus on sustainable rural tourism as well as pillar 5 with fight against brain drain. Rural areas are also addressed by horizontal and cross-cutting topics that support living conditions and economic development of rural areas through digitalisation and connectivity, and though raising importance of digital networks (4/5 G, optic) in rural areas making available digital public services.
- **Digitalisation.** Under this topic the priority is to set up the network of digital innovation hubs in the region, while at the same time building stronger connections within the network. This would increase availability of digital innovation tools, such as AI and the internet of things. This will concern in particular pillar 1 with a focus on digitalisation-related green & blue technology, pillar 2 with a focus on digitalisation in transport and energy, pillar 3 with a focus on digital sustainability solutions, pillar 4 with a focus on digitalisation in tourism and pillar 5 with a focus to digitalisation in the employment.

I.III Governance, funding, monitoring and evaluation

The revised action plan goes with the adaptation of the governance system. In short, the main structures of the Strategy governance are:

- **Governing Board** is a decision-making body and provides strategic guidance for the implementation of the action plan, to the Thematic Steering Groups, National Coordinators and governance support structure, decides the monitoring and evaluation activities, and assesses the progress of the implementation of the action plan.
- **National Coordinators** carry out national coordination and consolidation tasks related to the Strategy, by ensuring links and coordination with the relevant administrations and stakeholders, and present strategic national positions in the Strategy governance and implementation processes.
- **The Strategy's Youth Council** is a platform for institutional involvement of young people (18-29 years) in all governance bodies to make their ideas and viewpoints heard and considered. Youth will have an active role in communicating, orientating and implementing the Strategy.
- **Thematic Steering Groups** coordinate and drive the implementation work under their respective pillars. There is one Thematic Steering Group per pillar with the exception of pillar 2, where there are two sub-groups for transport and energy.
- **Pillar coordinators** coordinate the work of the respective Thematic Steering Groups. Usually, for every Thematic Steering Group the pillar coordination is shared by at least two coordinators, whenever feasible coming from two participating countries, one from an EU Member State and one from an EU candidate country or San Marino.

- **The Governance Facility Point and the other projects supporting Strategy governance** provide technical and content related assistance to the implementation of the action plan, including support to the Governing Board, National Coordinators, Thematic Steering Groups and pillar coordinators, and facilitate macro-regional (cross-pillar) actions and capacity building for stakeholders and key implementers. The Facility Point with its four functions has the main supporting and coordinating role in supporting the Strategy's governance bodies, in decision-making and capacity building, in communicating the Strategy and in monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy. The Stakeholders' Engagement Point encourages engagement with stakeholders, supports financial dialogues and embedding of the action plan and together with the Strategic Implementation Project supports the implementation of the Action Plan.

The pillars are currently coordinated by the following participating countries:

1. Pillar 1: Greece, Montenegro,
2. Pillar 2: Italy, Serbia, North Macedonia,
3. Pillar 3: Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina,
4. Pillar 4: Croatia, Albania,
5. Pillar 5: Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Strategy does not have own financial resources. Funding for actions and projects under the Strategy has to come from existing financial instruments. It is of importance to mobilise and use all EU, national and regional programmes and funding sources. Besides the cohesion policy and IPA funds (including Western Balkan Investment Framework initiative)¹, these are, as an example, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, Horizon Europe, Connecting Europe Facility-Transport supporting the Trans-European Networks for Transport (TEN-T), Connecting Europe Facility-Energy supporting the Trans-European Networks for Energy (TEN-E), the Digital Europe, Erasmus+, and LIFE.

Furthermore, EU territorial tools such as Integrated Territorial Investments, Community-Led Local development, local action groups under LEADER, 'renewable energy communities' and 'citizen energy communities', smart villages, etc. are important approaches to be mobilised by the revised Strategy.

Other means are available, notably from the European Investment Bank and other International Financial Institutions.

All funding sources have their own eligibility rules, selection criteria and implementation arrangements. The managing authorities of EU funding programmes play an important role by ensuring the embedding of the actions of the revised action plan into their programmes and projects. This requires close and long-term cooperation with the managing authorities through establishment of operational networks of managing authorities and National IPA Coordinators. National Coordinators and members of Thematic Steering Groups cooperate with managing authorities and

¹ The Western Balkans Investment Framework is a joint initiative of the EU, financial institutions, bilateral donors (Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and Norway) and beneficiaries (Western Balkans countries), aimed at enhancing harmonisation and cooperation in investments for the socio-economic development of the region and contributing to the European perspective of the Western Balkans.

NIPACs at the national level, with other National Coordinators on the strategic level, and with members of the Thematic Steering Groups on the operational level.

I.IV Action plan as rolling implementation tool

Operationally the action plan revisions should be aligned with the Multiannual Financial Framework programming to provide agreements on macro-regional thematic priorities to be embedded in the new programmes. In between revisions adjustments to the action plan are still possible.

The rolling character of the action plan provides all pillars and topics the chance to further develop and fine-tune their actions in the years to come, to be able to better respond to changing contexts and possible new crises, challenges and opportunities. The revised action plan is a 'rolling document', which implies that the Governing Board and Thematic Steering Groups should remain attentive and adopt appropriate actions if there is a need for adaptation.

Based on results of monitoring and evaluation, Commission reports and observed trends in the region, the Thematic Steering Groups might propose readjustments of existing topics and/or actions or even new topics and/or actions to the action plan. When duly justified, the Governing Board will approve such changes.

In addition, as a rule, and where appropriate, the Thematic Steering Groups, in cooperation with the National Coordinators, Revision Working Group and Governing Board, must undertake efforts to strengthen the focus and targeting of the pillars, also considering the integration of horizontal and cross-cutting issues into the actions – rather than at the level of topics – where appropriate. Based on the more focused pillars, this will also include setting appropriate measurable indicators and targets that can measure whether the Strategy is getting closer to the specific objectives. The new indicators can take inspiration from past monitoring reports and evaluations of the Strategy, the indicators used in other macro-regional strategies as well as the indicators for cohesion policy or IPA programmes set out in the regulations. The proposal for the strengthened focus and targeting of the pillars will be adopted by the Governing Board.

I.V Organisation of the action plan

Besides the horizontal and cross-cutting topics already described in this first chapter, the revised action plan is structured to reflect the five pillars as well as the topics selected under each pillar. Accordingly, the action plan incorporates the following features:

- **Pillars** address the core challenges and opportunities identified as being of central importance for the Adriatic-Ionian region. They are at the core of the revised Strategy and are essential to the success of its work, and how it is communicated.
- **Topics** under each pillar represent the main areas in which the macro-regional Strategy brings added value. For each topic, the revised action plan presents the issue and indicates what specific contribution it will bring.
- **Actions** under each topic are the interventions which the Strategy governance structures and stakeholders plan to carry out to address the set objectives and targets. These include e.g. new approaches, increased coordination in policy making, policy reviews, support to a process already underway, and networking initiatives. The Thematic Steering Groups assisted by the governance support structure will translate the actions into concrete project development processes and together with stakeholders bring added value to the region.

1. Pillar 1 –Blue Sustainable Economy

The Adriatic-Ionian region is rich in natural resources and biodiversity. However, it remains vulnerable to natural disasters, overexploitation of natural capital and resources and pollution. Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture are important sectors in the Adriatic-Ionian region, not only due to their economic and ecological contributions, but also due to social and cultural traditions. This concerns seas, coastal areas, islands, lake areas and transitional waters, river areas, and catchment areas of important water bodies (e.g. the whole hydrosphere).

Marine and maritime services encompass a wide range of activities, including shipping, port management, coastal tourism, biotechnology, fisheries, aquaculture, environmental protection and restoration, or research, among others. These activities are major drivers of economic growth, job creation and trade facilitation in the Adriatic-Ionian region and often constitute and include cross-pillar issues. The blue sustainable economy encompasses a spectrum of endeavours, including activities that are both land-based and marine-based, such as fish processing, sensor manufacturing and creating value from fish by-products and unavoidable unwanted catches. It is also significantly influenced by the dynamic interaction between land and sea at the coastal interface, influenced by factors like riverine inputs and human activities. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that blue economy value chains will invariably involve some form of application, utilisation, or reliance on marine and coastal environments, resources, or data.

To fulfil these aims, many challenges must be overcome. First, there are imbalances in innovative capacity, access to knowledge and research networks. There are also considerable differences in access to funding and administrative capacity, especially between EU and candidate countries. Candidate countries are often limited by the lack of support schemes and by obsolete technologies, which restrain their research, development and innovation potential. Overexploitation of natural resources is one other main challenge, leaving the local fauna in danger, and polluting the environment with an excess of nutrients, pesticides and antibiotics. This also includes the lack of effective waste management, which can result in the accumulation of large amounts of marine litter in the region. Moreover, the Adriatic-Ionian region, like the whole Mediterranean is highly exposed and sensitive to the effects of climate change.

The Strategy sets out to further promote the sustainable and responsible use of its natural resources, ensuring its conscious exploration and the creation of added value. It aims to develop innovative technologies, to strengthen the regional market by enhancing cooperation and clustering in the region, as well as stakeholder involvement and interrelation of businesses, and to increase competitiveness in related sectors both in coastal and inland areas always preserving and improving the environmental condition of the sea, coasts and inland waters (rivers and lakes). All of this will help to ensure comparable production and common and shared environmental standards across the entire region, and in compliance with the *EU acquis*.

In addition, this strategic framework outlines a comprehensive approach to address the challenges, capitalise on the opportunities, restore ocean and coastal ecosystems, and promote the adoption of blue and green technologies in the whole maritime and inland water bodies, sustainable and competitive fisheries and aquaculture and maritime and marine governance and services in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Achieving these objectives will require collaboration among governments, local communities, industry stakeholders, the Academic and Research Communities and international

organisations to safeguard the region's marine and freshwater resources and promote economic development.

Over the past few years, the Adriatic-Ionian region has gained experience in successful macro-regional cooperation, especially thanks to the networks of the largest ports of the region, of research institutions, of business organisation and clusters, and of regional authorities. This pillar provides continuation for these networks and addresses the region's challenges by promoting further forms of cooperation. This includes the facilitation of cooperation and networking between national and EU-funded research and innovation activities and the development of regional innovation communities. The Strategy supports the coordination of policies aimed at science and research and promotes the use of EU instruments to support research and innovation in blue and green technologies. It also promotes research collaboration, joint projects and sharing of research infrastructure.

Energy is a major cost item in EU fisheries and aquaculture. The recent energy crisis has hit the aquatic food sector hard, notably because of increased marine diesel prices, exposing one of its major vulnerabilities: high dependency on fossil fuels. A move towards alternative energy sources would not only address this vulnerability but also contribute to the objectives of the European Green Deal and the EU's commitment to become climate-neutral. On 21 February 2023, the European Commission published a 'fisheries and oceans' package, which includes an action plan on decarbonising and enhancing the sustainability of EU fisheries and aquaculture. The plan outlines two change directions: to increase energy efficiency in the short to medium term while gradually switching from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources.

Pillar 1 focuses on three topics:

1. To strengthen **blue and green technologies**, by promoting synergies and networking of regional relevant and useful research, development and innovation activities as well as supporting initiatives and cooperation between regional innovation ecosystems, initiatives and smart specialisation strategies.
2. To strengthen sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, through networking policy practices, business practices, research findings and other important assets (in maritime and lake environments) in the Adriatic-Ionian region.
3. Supporting maritime and marine governance and services, to make better use of the skills that are available and equip people with new skills (including soft skills) that are needed.

1.1 Topic – Blue and green technologies

Global objectives. Blue and green technologies are essential for the transition to a competitive, climate-neutral and resilient sustainable economy, i.e. the implementation of the EU Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. This involves the promotion of research, innovation and business opportunities in sustainable blue economy sectors, by strengthening quadruple helix ties and synergies among ongoing initiatives and projects in the region. The focus goes beyond the immediate marine and maritime areas; it also involves other natural habitats such as rivers, lakes and transitional waters, including the flora and fauna therein. It also targets the exploitation of the not yet (fully) utilised potentials which contribute to a sustainable technology and economic transitions regardless of where they are located.

Strategy objectives. The evolution of the marine and maritime sector and the growing importance of water as a key resource for sustainability require a unified approach at the Strategy level. To promote research, innovation and business opportunities for the marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnology, there is a need to strengthen synergies among initiatives and funding programmes active in the area and cooperation between EU Member states and candidate countries. The overall objective is to maximise progress in research, technological development and innovation to help solve societal challenges by creating synergies between smart specialisation approaches and strengthening the quadruple helix ties between research units, business support organisations, SME and sector-specific business associations and clusters in the field of green and blue technologies in the region. This may also involve improving shipbuilding technology to strengthen green shipbuilding. This involves promoting

- synergies and networking to jointly work for relevant research, development and innovation activities and initiatives;
- networking and cooperation between macro-regional innovation systems, initiatives and smart specialisation strategies of the Adriatic-Ionian region;
- macro-regional innovation collaboration and investments;
- exchanges between the business sector and the research world;
- support blue-green SMEs of the Adriatic-Ionian region to develop favourable framework conditions for their internationalisation through cooperation and access to finance for SMEs as well as the promotion of start-ups and SME growth and development.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, and the below mentioned challenges and opportunities, the activities under this topic aim at:

- enhancing stable and formal collaborations between Adriatic-Ionian region innovation ecosystems regarding green and blue (bio) technologies, leading to an increased number of patents in the fields of blue and green growth;
- increased shares of economic activity and returns in sectors related to blue and green growth as well as increased use of blue and green novel technologies to safeguard and restore the aquatic environment and improve the competitiveness and sustainability of the maritime, fisheries and aquaculture sectors in global markets; and
- stronger networks among relevant players in the Adriatic-Ionian region concerning research on green and blue technologies, leading to more intensive research and public- and private collaborations and networks in the field, and increased numbers of players from the Adriatic-Ionian region involved in Horizon Europe projects.

1.1.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

The above objectives, based on an analysis of the opportunities and challenges below, illustrate that the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Capitalising on Adriatic-Ionian regions, which are among the fastest growing innovation performers in the EU.
- Collaboration between lagging regions and more developed regions can improve and facilitate knowledge transfer, technological upgrading and entrepreneurship.
- Easier access to finance can promote innovative companies and start-ups for marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnology.
- Developing competitive macro-regional platforms for an enhanced collaborative ecosystem for research, innovation, entrepreneurship, where SMEs can foster the development of existing Research, Development and Innovation cooperation in the different technology fields through with strategic and complementary actions that would have a stronger impact and more scalable results.
- Explore possibilities to link marine and maritime technologies and biotechnologies with landlocked countries, and to link with scientific activities in the internal waters such as in rivers and lakes.

Challenges:

- Increasing disparities in innovation performance between EU and candidate countries.
- Lagging regions underrepresented in competitive programmes such as Horizon Europe.
- Asymmetries in common connecting and exploiting synergies between landlocked countries and countries with access to the sea, and thus in finding common goals.
- Insufficient support in terms of funding and marketing operations, lack of specific national policies and/or legislation under which blue (bio) technologies could be developed and implemented,
- Fragmentation of the sector, lack of established blue biotech value chains, underdeveloped collaboration between science-industry-policy makers.
- In candidate countries, only few research groups and networks are actively involved in this sector and generally they are not specialised in blue (bio) technologies.
- Lack of cooperation and networking between research institutions and the private sector of marine and maritime technology enterprises, and the common use of resources for developing certain products with common standards.

1.1.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan in the following manner:

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The activities will help the candidate countries to better integrate with EU Member States in the field of research and innovation related to blue and green economy and technology. More specifically, the enlargement activities are related to the *EU acquis* Chapters 3 (right of establishment and freedom to provide services), 6 (company law), 7 (intellectual property law), 8 (competition), 18 (statistics), 20 (enterprise and industrial policy), 22 (regional policy and coordination of structural instruments), 25 (science and

research), 26 (education and culture), 27 (environment), 28 (consumer and health protection).

- **Capacity building.** The activities have a strong research and innovation focus which subsequently will contribute to increasing capacities among relevant players in the region.
- **Innovation and research.** The activities are directly targeted to strengthening innovation ecosystems and research in accordance with respective smart specialisation communities with aim of building macro-regional S3s on sustainable blue economy and green technologies.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** Blue and green technologies are important enabling components of the circular economy and of the ecological transition. Using developed and new system business models/initiatives (such as Climate-KIC)² in participating countries to support implementation of the circular economy and value chains development.
- **Green rural development.** The topic does not include an explicit link to green rural development activities. However, some of the activities related to aquaculture and coastal bioeconomy can contribute to the regeneration of some rural areas. Building on smart community/village concept to support sustainable development of the rural areas using also green and blue technologies.
- **Digitalisation.** The digital transition will be supported e.g. through activities related to the development of favourable framework conditions for the adoption of technological and digital solutions in the field of blue and green growth; the strengthening of digital innovation hubs will facilitate cooperation and networking between national and EU-funded research and innovation initiatives.
- **Nature preservation and restoration.** Any economic development must be sustainable. This implies decoupling the use of natural resources from economic growth, tackling climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. This must be the priority of all actions, with environmental impacts being duly monitored.

1.1.3 Action – Building Adriatic-Ionian region innovation systems that will promote research and innovation networks in green and blue technologies

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Building Adriatic-Ionian region innovation ecosystems that will promote research and innovation networks in green and blue technologies
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing Adriatic-Ionian region innovation communities (increasing participation in EU competitive programmes, possibilities for innovation up-scaling, better match of innovative sustainable services and products with demand, etc.). • Developing and/or strengthening cooperation between smart specialisation

² EIT Climate-KIC is an Europe's leading climate innovation agency and community, supporting cities, regions, countries and industries to meet their climate ambitions through systems innovation and place-based transformations. For further details, please refer to <https://www.climate-kic.org/>.

	<p>strategies and thematic smart specialisation partnerships, interregional innovation investments, and cooperation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting regional partnerships to develop, connect or make complementary use of testing and demonstration facilities in shared smart specialisation priority areas. • Cooperation to develop favourable framework conditions for technological and digital solutions in the field of blue and green growth. • Coordination of science and research policies to create a common research and innovation area. • Develop favourable support policies to facilitate the transfer of knowledge from research to application/innovation. • Promote research collaboration on blue and green technologies as part of a circular economy. • Promote joint projects and sharing of research infrastructure for common projects. • Support the promotion of EIT Regional Innovation Scheme³, Horizon EU Missions, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and other EU instruments to support research and innovation in blue and green technologies. • Facilitate the cooperation and networking between national and EU-funded research and innovation initiatives (digital innovation hubs, Knowledge and Innovation Communities, clusters, etc.). <p>Promote Green Shipbuilding technologies.</p>
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interregional innovation cooperation. • Insufficient support in terms of funding and marketing operations, lack of specific national policies and/or legislation under which blue and green technologies could be developed. • Lack of the cooperation and networking between research institutions and the private sector of marine and maritime technology enterprises, and the common use of resources for developing certain products with common standards. • Capitalising on Adriatic-Ionian regions, which are among the EU fastest growing innovation performers. • Promotion of collaboration between lagging regions and more developed regions can improve and facilitate knowledge transfer, technological upgrading and entrepreneurship. • Challenges to link biotechnologies with landlocked countries, and to link with scientific activities in those countries. • Lack of access to finance for innovative companies and start-ups for marine and maritime technologies and blue biotechnology.
What are the expected results/targets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Innovation Hubs, Knowledge and Innovation Communities and clusters focusing on green and blue technologies created[*], ^{**}, P1F1. • Improved Research, Development and Innovation and cooperation among

³ The EIT Regional Innovation Scheme is a joint initiative by the European Institute of Innovation & Technology to boost innovation capacities across Europe, based on the European Innovation Scoreboard. For further details, please refer to <https://eit-ris.eu/>.

of the action?	<p>SMEs and between SMEs, large enterprises and research centres operating in the Adriatic-Ionian region^{*, P1F1}.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased networking between researchers, SMEs and clusters^{*, P1F1}. Increased joint research papers and number of researchers exchanged within the macro-region^{*, P1F1}. Access to finance and promotion of the creation of start-ups has improved^{P1F1}. Enhanced collaborative networks among relevant players in the Adriatic-Ionian region concerning innovation and research on green and blue technologies^{*, P1F1}. Increase in innovation investments on the macro-regional level^{P1F1}. Enhanced digital transition and strengthening digital innovation hubs^{**}. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under the flagship FOSTERING QUADRUPLE HELIX TIES IN THE FIELD OF MARINE AND MARITIME TECHNOLOGIES AND BLUE BIO-TECHNOLOGIES FOR ADVANCING INNOVATION, BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AND BUSINESS ADAPTATION IN THE BLUE BIOECONOMY, the following strategic projects were developed so far:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> AimFrish - Evaluating freshness and authenticity with real-time non-destructive methods to increase the value added of fish produced in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. SeaSusPack - Sustainable packaging of fish and aquatic food based on marine bioresources. AMOS - Developing a cost – effective observatory system, tailored to the needs of aquacultures with remote access, real-time data and forecast capabilities. <p>Cross-pillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BLUECULTURE - Development of a macro-regional cluster on BlueCulture Technologies and creation of an International Competence Centre (Pillars 1 and 4). WAI-TP: WATERBORNE - Adriatic-Ionian Technology Platform (Pillars 1 and 2) 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the Strategy activities under this action?	OI: Pilot actions developed jointly and implemented in project ideas	RCO 84 Interreg: Pilot actions developed and implemented jointly	0 p.a. (2023)	5 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system
	OI: No. of new project ideas supported to mature into projects ready for submission		0 p.a. (2023)	10 (2030)	TSG monitoring system

	RI: Innovations enabled (number of new products, services, processes, business models or methods)		0 p.a. (2023)	5 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system
	RI: Jointly developed solutions (number of new products, services, processes, business models or methods)	RCO 116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions	0 p.a. (2023)	5 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system

*: Horizontal topic expected result/target of the action

**: Cross-cutting topic expected result/target of the action

P1F1: Pillar 1 Flagship 1 for Topic 1.1.

1.2 Topic – Fisheries and aquaculture

Global objectives. Sustainable aquaculture and fisheries management is a central part of a sustainable regional development, especially in coastal areas and rural regions.

The aim of the Common Fisheries Policy is to ensure that fishing and aquaculture activities are environmentally sustainable in the long-term and are managed in a way that is consistent with the objectives of achieving economic, social and employment benefits, and of contributing to the availability of food supplies⁴ and food security. Aquaculture and fisheries represent critical sectors in the Adriatic-Ionian's economy and their responsible management is vital to ensure long-term environmental, social and economic viability as they have the potential to drive economic growth and create job opportunities in the region. The Strategy aims to harness these sectors for the benefit of local economies and ensure a consistent supply of aquatic food products to meet the region's food security needs and envisions a future where aquaculture and fisheries are sustainable, environmentally responsible and, social and economically beneficial.

Strategy objectives. The overall objective is to support cooperation efforts aiming at networking policy practices, business practices, research findings and other important assets to strengthen the fisheries and aquaculture sectors (in maritime and inland environments) in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

In the region, fisheries and aquaculture are an integral part of the cultural, social and economic fabric. However, several challenges have emerged that have changed the approach for sustainable and competitive fisheries and aquaculture. In fisheries, catch levels are lower compared to decades ago; this has led to restrictions and common management measures. Increasing human pressures on the marine environment and demographic changes have also produced changes in the predominantly small-scale fisheries of the region. On the other hand, aquaculture production has grown in the past decades compared to fisheries. Although the growth in aquaculture might be comparatively slower than in some other countries globally, it remains a valuable component of the region's aquatic food industry. Aquaculture offers several benefits, including the production of

⁴ According to Article 1 of [Regulation \(EU\) No 1380/2013](#), the Common Fisheries Policy covers: (a) the conservation of marine biological resources and the management of fisheries and fleets exploiting such resources and (b) in relation to measures on markets and financial measures in support of the implementation of the policy: fresh water biological resources, aquaculture, and the processing and marketing of fisheries and aquaculture products.

nutritious and high-quality aquatic food products, which are vital for food security and a healthy diet. Furthermore, it contributes to employment opportunities, bolstering the regional economy and livelihoods. Additionally, certain types of aquaculture can provide climate-mitigation services (such as carbon sequestration), climate-adaptation services (such as nature-based coastal protection), or ecosystem services (such as ponds or wetlands). This type of aquaculture should be promoted. There is a need for action to build upon existing fishery and aquaculture resources in order to ensure a sustainable, resilient, and competitive future.

Sustainable aquaculture and fisheries management covering the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and relevant inland waters involves the coordination of many inter-sectoral and transboundary issues and responsibilities for better management of the natural resources. Effective and better fisheries management at the sea and relevant inland waters requires strong coordination between the different macro-regional strategies. In this context, close collaboration of relevant envisaged activities for inland waters, which have been identified in the Danube macro-regional strategy (EUSDR) is required to avoid duplication.

Strategy actions under this topic are also related to other pillars, in particular activities in the Adriatic-Ionian region promoting: a) sustainable maritime governance and spatial planning; b) circularity in fishery and aquaculture activities, c) green maritime transport and ports; d) maritime clusters set up as an innovative enabler for a sustainable blue (bio) economy and e) sustainable maritime, coastal, and rivers and lake tourism.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, challenges and opportunities, the activities under this topic aim at:

- developing a more sustainable, resilient and competitive fishery industry in the Adriatic-Ionian region, including a regional fisheries information system;
- developing a more sustainable, resilient and competitive aquaculture sector in the Adriatic-Ionian region, including both marine, freshwater and land-based aquaculture, and growing volumes of Adriatic-Ionian aquaculture products on the market;
- better fisheries management measures, sustainable exploitation of fish stocks, improvement of data collection and fish stock assessment, harmonisation with EU regulations & international organisations;
- sustainable growth of a more efficient and circular aquaculture production, capitalising on innovation, digitalisation, and knowledge sharing;
- support and encourage the adoption of sustainable sourcing standards for aquaculture and fisheries stocks through the use of standards such as the Marine Stewardship Council, Seafood Watch for Aquaculture and others.

1.2.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Growing demand and market prices for fishery products.

- Under the umbrella of the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, coordination efforts and joint multiannual fisheries management are being organised to avert overfishing and the decrease of stocks and they are showing encouraging results.
- Establishment of marine protected areas, other effective area-based conservation measures and/or Ecological and Fishery Protection Zones, like the Jabuka/Pomo Pit area in the Central Adriatic, to protect valuable marine habitats, preserve the marine biodiversity and ensure the long-term health of fish stocks.
- Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture value chains are well developed in the Adriatic-Ionian region and they contribute to the socio-economic fabric of the region.
- Further explore and tap into the role of fishery operators for the conservation of the sea.
- Small-scale coastal fishing has a pivotal role in regional development of coastal regions, as it is key for other areas of development (e.g. employment, environment, tourism).
- Huge potential to diversify fisheries and further explore the link between fisheries, aquaculture, wildlife watching, recreational activities, and tourism which have not yet been explored extensively.
- Sustainable aquaculture production continues to grow due to high demand and restrictions to traditional fishing, with a positive role for farmed aquaculture products for environmental sustainability and food security (including micro and macroalgae).
- The Adriatic-Ionian region has several freshwater resources, with numerous lakes and rivers, which can be explored for sustainable use (fisheries, aquaculture, tourism activities).
- Setup a maritime spatial planning to accommodate green and blue maritime activities, Allocated Zones for Aquaculture, renewable energy production, marine protected areas and improve and align the legal framework for such investments. Missing data concerning some fish stock assessments.
- Compliance with existing regulations leading to the need to renovate and restructure fishing fleets and to improve fishing gear efficiency and sustainability; for example, through selectivity and new, less polluting engines.

Challenges:

- The situation of some exploited stocks in the Adriatic-Ionian needs close monitoring.
- Lack of coordinated and agreed solutions to reduce overfishing (e.g. fishing quotas, expanding recreational fishing, maritime and river-based tourism).
- Lack of compliance, data quality and well as monitoring, control, inspections and surveillance capacity in some Adriatic-Ionian countries.
- Lack of monitoring throughout the region with regards to assessment and implementation of fishery management plans that are introduced to achieve maximum sustainable yields and resource conservation.
- Lack of coordinated restoration/protection activities on freshwater resources to ensure healthy and sustainable freshwater ecosystems.
- Low rate of adaptation to institutionalised spatial planning: existing areas designated for aquaculture are fully occupied, and conflicts with other uses (e.g. tourism) provide limited spatial possibilities for coastal marine aquaculture development.
- Negative effects on the environment and ecosystems through some human (aquaculture, tourism, etc) activities that are not environmentally sustainable.

- High levels of pollution in the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and freshwater ecosystems due to marine litter, microplastic, pesticides, antibiotics, excess of nutrients, etc.
- Low level of skills, education, and knowledge in traditional small-scale fisheries, in the fish processing value chain and in the aquaculture sector. This includes low level of adaptation to new business concepts/activities and digitalisation.
- Complex and not harmonised processes for licences and authorisation of fisheries, aquaculture and land-based fish-farming installations across the region.
- Climate change results in sea warming that promotes the migration and installation of Invasive Alien Species to the Adriatic-Ionian latitudes that outcompete or even drive endemic species to extinction.

1.2.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The activities help the candidate countries to better integrate with EU Member States in EU fishery policies and compliance of candidate countries with the *EU acquis* in the fields of fisheries, environmental protection, training and education. In more detail, the enlargement activities are related to the *EU acquis* Chapters 8 (competition), 12 (food safety and veterinary policy), 13 (Fisheries), 18 (statistics), 20 (enterprise and industrial policy), 25 (science and research), 26 (education and culture), 27 (environment), 28 (consumer and health protection).
- **Capacity building.** The activities have a strong focus on capacity building and training e.g. related to diversifying activities for fishers, sustainability, new technology and practices as well as funding opportunities in the fields of sustainable fisheries and aquaculture.
- **Innovation and research.** The activities include a number of proposals related to research projects, technological pilots, capacity building and investments regarding e.g. the use of aquaculture products (fish, algae etc.) for other purposes (pharmacy, cosmetics, etc.) and new fish products and new species in aquaculture.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture are sectors which are directly relevant for the transition to a circular economy.
- **Green rural development.** The topic does not include an explicit link to green rural development activities. However, some of the activities will be related to better using the resources of rural areas.
- **Digitalisation.** The digital transition can be supported e.g. through activities related to digitalisation in the fisheries and aquaculture sectors, e.g. from harvest to distribution using Internet of things, data science, digital monitoring systems and predictive microbiology.
- **Nature restoration.** [see above, previous section].

1.2.3 Action – Sustainable, resilient and competitive fisheries in the Adriatic-Ionian region

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Sustainable, resilient and competitive fisheries in the Adriatic-Ionian region
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange of experiences and coordinated activities to reduce overfishing and support the harmonisation of integrated management and monitoring efforts. • Take preparatory actions to develop an Adriatic-Ionian region small-scale fisheries Strategy to encourage networking of fishing associations. • Creating an Adriatic-Ionian region inter-branch network bringing together players from the fish value chain. • Improving resilience of small-scale fisheries due to climate change and human pressures. • Cooperation in research projects, technological pilots, capacity building and investments. • Best practice sharing, capacity building and coordination of activities to diversify activities for fishermen. • Gather knowledge and share best practices on digitalisation of the fisheries sector, e.g. from harvest to distribution using the Internet of Things, data science, and predictive microbiology. • Developing a catalogue of skills (including soft skills) and contents for training and capacity building for fisheries professionals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ improved monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, including the use of advanced technology and increased surveillance, to combat Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; ○ introducing innovative and more selective fishing gears and practices to minimise bycatch and implementing effective discards reduction; ○ enhanced occupational safety standards and improved social welfare programmes for workers in the fisheries and aquaculture sector, leading to increased job attractiveness and retention; ○ increased awareness and engagement of local communities in conservation efforts, leading to the protection and preservation of rare and migratory fish species in the Adriatic-Ionian region.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of coordinated and agreed solutions to reduce overfishing. • Missing data concerning the fish stock assessment. • Lack of monitoring of the application of fishery management plans in order to achieve maximum sustainable yields and resource conservation. • Urgent need to renovate and restructure the fishing fleets and to improve the fishing gear. • Improve the knowledge of the ecological dynamics between small-scale fisheries and protected species and habitats, alien species included. • Lack of coordinated restoration/protection activities on freshwater resources to ensure healthy and sustainable freshwater habitats. • Low level of skills, education, and contemporary knowledge in the traditional small-scale fisheries, in the fish processing value chain including low level of adaptation to new businesses concepts/activities and digitalisation.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of a more effective harmonisation with the EU regulatory framework. • Need to achieve compliance of candidate countries with the <i>EU acquis</i> in the field of fisheries, environmental protection, training and education etc. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A more sustainable, resilient and competitive fisheries industry in the Adriatic-Ionian region^{*, P1F2}. • Less polluted Adriatic and Ionian Seas and freshwater resources^{*, **}. • Better management and sustainable exploitation of fish stocks^{P1F2}. • Improvement of data collection and fish stock assessment^{P1F2}. • Improved fisheries management & harmonisation with EU regulations & international organisations^{*, P1F2}. • Compliance & implementation of measures to combat illegal, unreported, unregulated fisheries and elimination of destructive fishing practices^{P1F2}. • Use of fish by-products, unwanted and unavoidable catches and discards^{*, **, P1F2}. • Plans to improve professional skills of fishermen^{*, P1F2}. • Digitalisation in the fisheries sector^{**}. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under the flagship ‘Promoting Sustainability, Diversification and Competitiveness in the Fisheries Sector through Education, Research & Development, Administrative, Technological and Marketing Actions, including the Promotion of Initiatives on Marketing Standards and Healthy Nutritional Habits’ the following strategic projects were developed so far:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FishTourAIR - Fishing tourism and ichthyology tourism diversification activities in the Adriatic-Ionian region. • AimFrish - Evaluating freshness and authenticity with real-time non-destructive methods to increase the value added of fish produced in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. • SeaSusPack - Sustainable packaging of fish and aquatic food based on marine bioresources. 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Pilot actions developed jointly and implemented in project ideas	RCO 84 Interreg: Pilot actions developed and implemented jointly	0 p.a. (2023)	5 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system
	OI: No. of new project ideas supported to mature into projects ready for submission		0 p.a. (2023)	10 (2030)	TSG monitoring system

	RI: Solutions taken up or up-scaled by organisations	RCR 104 Interreg: Solutions taken up or up-scaled	0 p.a. (2023)	5 (2030)	MA monitoring system / survey
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*: Horizontal topic expected result/target of the action

**: Cross-cutting topic expected result/target of the action

P1F2: Pillar 1 Flagship 2 for Topic 1.2, Action 1.2.1.

1.2.4 Action – Sustainable, resilient and competitive aquaculture in the Adriatic-Ionian region

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Sustainable, resilient and competitive aquaculture in the Adriatic-Ionian region
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation and joint actions to reduce complexity of legal and administrative frameworks and to accede space and water for aquaculture. • Characterising the ecological role of aquaculture in protected areas for wild stock fauna enhancement and flora/conservation. • Promoting networking, sharing of good practices and experiences and the creation of clusters on sustainable aquaculture to further unlock innovation potential. • Cooperation on establishing a common sustainability certification scheme, including costs and added value for aquaculture in the Adriatic-Ionian region. • Develop a comprehensive catalogue of skills (including soft skills) and contents for capacity building and training programmes designed for aquaculture professionals, while also providing support for their skill development. • Gather knowledge and share best practices on digitalisation in the aquaculture sector. • Cooperation in research projects, technological pilots, capacity building and investments regarding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ developing new processed products and new species; ○ assessing the environmental effects of aquaculture in order to mitigate them; ○ exploring the potential positive effects of aquaculture in marine environments (e.g. nutrient and carbon sequestration in bivalve farming) and ponds; ○ create dynamic 3dimensional models that will assist the environmental impact assessments and determination of the carrying capacity of an area for licensing; ○ use of aquaculture products (fish, algae etc.) for other purposes (pharmacy, cosmetics, etc.); ○ increased efficiency and productivity in aquaculture operations through the adoption of innovative and sustainable production techniques. • Enhanced occupational safety standards and improved social welfare programmes for workers in the aquaculture sector, leading to increased job attractiveness and retention.
Which challenges and opportunities is	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low rate of adaptation to institutionalised spatial planning: existing areas designated for aquaculture are fully occupied and conflicts with other uses (e.g. tourism) provide limited spatial possibilities for coastal marine

this action addressing?	<p>aquaculture development.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better define the ecosystem carrying capacity and avoid potential adverse effects on ecosystems from aquaculture activities and define Allocated Zones for Aquaculture. Complex and not harmonised processes for licences and authorisation of, marine, freshwater aquaculture and land-based aquaculture across the macro-region. <p>Need for candidate countries to achieve compliance with the <i>EU acquis</i> in the field of aquaculture, environmental protection, training and education etc.</p>				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A more sustainable, resilient, and competitive marine, freshwater and land-based aquaculture sector^{*, P1F2}. Increase in volume of aquaculture products on the market^{P1F2}. New aquaculture products and new species in aquaculture^{*, P1F2}. Means and plans to improve professional and soft skills of aquaculture professionals^{*, P1F2}. Adoption of Common Sustainability Standards^{*, P1F2}. Advanced Environmental Impact Assessment Tools^{*, P1F2}. Diversification of Product Utilisation^{*, P1F2}. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under the flagship 'Promoting Sustainability, Diversification and Competitiveness in the Fisheries Sector through Education, Research & Development, Administrative, Technological and Marketing Actions, including the Promotion of Initiatives on Marketing Standards and Healthy Nutritional Habits' the following strategic projects were developed so far:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SeaSusPack - Sustainable packaging of fish and aquatic food based on marine bioresources. AMOS - Developing a cost – effective observatory system, tailored to the needs of Aquacultures with remote access, real-time data and forecast capabilities. 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Pilot actions developed jointly and implemented in project ideas	RCO 84 Interreg: Pilot actions developed and implemented jointly	0 p.a. (2023)	5 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system
	OI: No. of new project ideas supported to mature into projects ready for submission		0 p.a. (2023)	10 (2030)	TSG monitoring system
	RI: Jointly developed solutions (number of new products, services, processes, business	RCO 116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions	0 p.a. (2023)	5 (2030)	MA monitoring system

	models or methods)				
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*: Horizontal topic expected result/target of the action

**: Cross-cutting topic expected result/target of the action

P1F2: Pillar 1 Flagship 2 for Topic 1.2, Action 1.2.2.

1.3 Topic – Maritime and marine governance and services

Global objectives. Maritime and marine governance and services are essential for the sound management of shared resources. This involves improved governance of maritime space and land-sea interactions as well as improved skills and capacities of the relevant players. This covers a wide range of fields including the development of capacities to harmonise standards and regulations to improve the sustainable governance use of maritime technologies and marine resources, including standardisation at macro-regional level to enable a technological leap forward. A key is increased data exchange, knowledge sharing and cooperation of planning and control authorities to ensure a sustainable management of natural resources; and furthermore to promote the use of digital technologies and new technological tools for planning and land-use/marine space analysis and control including hydrodynamic oceanographic models. To contribute to the offshore renewable energy EU targets by 2030 and beyond and to the energy efficiency and transition in sustainable fisheries and aquaculture.

Strategy objectives. The overall objective is to support cooperation among players in the Adriatic-Ionian region to make better use of the skills that are available and equip people with new skills (including soft skills) that are needed. This covers a wide range of fields including the cooperation of maritime and land-based spatial planning and governance of maritime and land-sea space.

The effective governance and services in the maritime and marine domains are essential for the sustainable and integrated development of the region and includes Maritime Spatial Planning of man-made activities that should balance economic development, environmental protection and social wellbeing in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Therefore, it has strong links with the other four pillars of the Strategy.

The Strategy for the future should implement an integrated maritime policy that coordinates and harmonises various activities that take place in the marine environment, including maritime transport, aquaculture, fisheries, marine protected areas, marine reserves and conservation zones to safeguard fragile ecosystems, biodiversity, and endangered species, preservation of submerged cultural heritage sites, including shipwrecks and archaeological relics, port infrastructure, energy generation including siting and regulating offshore energy installations, such as wind farms, wave energy devices and oil and gas drilling platforms, to ensure their safety and minimise environmental impacts. It also includes designate areas for marine tourism, recreational activities and the development of tourism infrastructure (Pillar 4), planning and maintaining underwater telecommunication cables, pipelines for oil and gas transport and electricity transmission lines require careful coordination in Maritime Spatial Planning to avoid conflicts and environmental damage. The Strategy should include activities related to prevent marine litter pollution from plastics and other emerging pollutants, and plans for the clean-up of marine pollution, such as oil spills and the removal of marine debris, that should be integrated into Maritime Spatial Planning plans to protect the marine environment (synergies with Pillar 3). Strengthening grid infrastructure and interregional cooperation by promoting the development of offshore wind energy and energy

efficiency in complementarity with Pillar 2 by building a substantial offshore power grid and Pillar 3 by incorporating marine renewables in the Maritime Spatial Planning.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, challenges and opportunities listed below, the activities under this topic aim at:

- improving the quality of public services and improving governance mechanisms for international cooperation and strengthening institutional capacities in a wide range of sectors (e.g. fishery policy, maritime spatial planning, integrated coastal management);
- improving the evidence base for policy and decision-making by sharing data and knowledge among public bodies and strengthening their capacities to seize opportunities or react to challenges which can be detected earlier if data and information is shared and analysed across countries;
- improving the state of the maritime and marine environments through an increased uptake of digital technological tools and skills in maritime and territorial spatial planning which help to improve governance and planning processes;
- developing supply chains and skills in sustainable fisheries and aquaculture by using large-scale partnerships for offshore⁵ renewable energy under the Pact for Skills.

1.3.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces several identified challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Strengthening cooperation between developed and underdeveloped countries that significant potential for innovation and new business opportunities.
- Capitalisation on existing results, implemented activities and projects within the Strategy, the Interreg ADRION programme, IPA funding and others.
- Developing cooperation of the Strategy pillars with other macro-regional strategies and initiatives.
- Accelerating the implementation of relevant policies in the Adriatic-Ionian region and related challenges of joint interest to the Strategy territory and scope.

⁵ The increasing number of offshore wind turbines and solar farms (floating or fixed) is representing a new challenge in terms of spatial planning and the marine environment. It will be indeed needed to mitigate the impacts of offshore renewables and adapt them to the needs of nature protection, like e.g.:

- Potential use of subsea offshore wind park infrastructure as artificial reefs and breeding grounds for marine species, while fulfilling all applicable environmental standards and ensuring proper environmental monitoring;
- Testing nature restoration methods for management of degraded ecosystems;
- Deploying new methods and technologies for environmental monitoring and management and mainstreaming successful approaches in line with approached and methodological standards developed under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

- Increased promotion of the blue economy, on islands and coastal areas, offers significant potential in relation to the exploitation of marine resources for food, food and health products, management and protection of marine and coastal areas, maritime transport, shipbuilding, and shipping services, as well as marine renewable energy.
- The green and digital transition processes are rooted in skills; therefore, it is necessary to strengthen and create skills (upskilling and reskilling) in order to achieve transitions.
- To incorporate the offshore renewable energy and energy efficiency measures applied to ports and vessels into the Maritime Spatial Plans and marine governance and services.

Challenges:

- Maritime Spatial Planning implementation across borders of the maritime spatial plans is not coherent, although developed to reduce conflicts and create synergies between different activities.
- Urgent need for training in the use of new technologies, oceanographic models, remote robotics, smart devices, etc. A new workforce is emerging, which should handle these devices and technologies properly.
- The multi-use of marine space is creating challenges due to conflicting activities: renewable energy, aquaculture, nature conservation, underwater heritage, shipwrecks, and tourism. There are many and often different obstacles in the current legal framework of each participating country to facilitate the multi-use of marine space.
- Increase of pollution due to macro and microplastics, pesticides, antibiotics, etc. associated with the activities in the area.
- Geographical, economic, environmental, and demographic disadvantages and challenges of island regions, while at the same time the vulnerability of their natural living conditions and productive systems is high.

1.3.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The activities help the candidate countries to better integrate with EU Member States in field of EU maritime and marine policies through the support to the harmonisation of standards and regulations to improve the sustainable governance use of maritime and marine resources and promotion of digital solutions and knowledge exchange among countries. More specifically, the enlargement activities are related to the *EU acquis* Chapters 3 (right of establishment and freedom to provide services), 6 (company law), 7 (intellectual property law), 8 (competition), 18 (statistics), 20 (enterprise and industrial policy), 22 (regional policy and coordination of structural instruments), 25 (science and research), 26 (education and culture), 27 (environment), 28 (consumer and health protection).
- **Capacity building.** The activities have a strong focus on capacity building and training e.g. to increase capacities related to the EU maritime and marine policies, harmonise standards and regulations and seizing opportunities or reacting to challenges that can be detected earlier if data and information is shared and analysed across countries. This should also include

development of skills in the blue professions/ improvement of the levels of skills and expertise of people working in sectors such as maritime transport, coastal and marine tourism, aquaculture and fisheries, marine hydrocarbon extraction, maritime transport and port activities, shipbuilding and ship repair activities, marine renewable energy sources, blue biotechnology, New technologies at sea and shipping. Furthermore, it will lead to an improvement of skills and expertise in the offshore renewable energy and energy efficiency sector.

- **Innovation and research.** The activities include several proposals related to data exchange and digital technological tools in maritime and territorial spatial planning, governance and services, including the promotion of innovative and smart transformation of island production systems by strengthening and diversifying local production based on smart specialisation. Also, strengthening and supporting, through the Smart Specialisation, the energy efficiency in the local fisheries and aquaculture production systems in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** Maritime and marine governance are directly relevant for the transition to a circular economy as they help to shape the preconditions for the transition to a circular economy in these fields.
- **Green rural development.** The topic does not include an explicit link to green rural development activities. However, some of the activities will probably be related to better utilising resources of rural areas and strengthening entrepreneurship and local cooperative schemes, in coastal areas including islands.
- **Digitalisation.** The digital transition can be supported e.g. through activities related to the use of digital tools in maritime and territorial spatial planning, governance and services, including e.g. data exchange platforms, strengthening maritime surveillance and improving the level of navigation safety.

The activities within the Maritime and Marine Governance and Services topic serve as a crucial catalyst for advancing both horizontal and cross-cutting aspects of the revised action plan, driving harmonisation, capacity building, innovation and green transition while embracing sustainability and forward-looking practices.

1.3.3 Action – Institutional capacity to harmonise standards and regulations

Description of the action	
Name of the action	Institutional capacity to harmonise standards and regulations to improve the sustainable governance and use of maritime and marine resources
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation in implementation of adopted Maritime Spatial Plans to achieve coherent practices across borders. • Promotion of Maritime Spatial Planning principles in candidate countries. • Cooperation in adopting clearer legal frameworks for the development of Allocated Zones for Aquaculture, marine protected areas, other effective area-based conservation measures, exploiting deep-sea water and marine biological and mineral resources.

Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New horizontal skills are highly required (listening, relationship-building, team working, and cultural awareness) to accompany the twin transition. • The challenge of the multi-use of marine space by various activities: renewable energy, aquaculture, nature conservation, maritime transport, and tourism. In many cases, there are several obstacles to the current legal framework of each participating country to facilitate the multi-use of marine space. • The challenge between EU and candidate countries in compliance/adaptation with the <i>EU acquis</i>. • Maritime spatial plans should also promote the prevention and reduction of pollution (e.g. microplastic, pesticides, antibiotics, etc.) associated with the activities in the area, as well as the preservation and regeneration of local biodiversity. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved quality of public services*. • Improved maritime and marine governance and services*, **, P1F3. • Common understandings and harmonised standards and regulations as well as sharing of best practices through institutional capacity of the involved public bodies, institutions and stakeholders in a wide range of sectors (e.g. fishery policy, maritime spatial planning, integrated coastal management) *, **, P1F3. • Compliance/adaptation of candidate countries with the <i>EU acquis</i> *, **, P1F3. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under the flagship ‘Bolstering Capacity Building and Efficient Coordination of Planning and Local Development Activities for Improving Marine and Maritime Governance and Blue Growth Services’ the following strategic projects were developed so far:</p> <p>Cross-pillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WAI-TP - ‘WATERBORNE Adriatic-Ionian Technology Platform’ (Pillars 1 and 2) • MSP & ICZM - ‘Establishment a Community for the sustainable management of maritime activities in the AIR’ (Pillars 1 and 3) 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Pilot actions developed jointly and implemented in project ideas	RCO 84 Interreg: Pilot actions developed and implemented jointly	0 p.a. (2023)	2 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system
	OI: No. of new project ideas supported to mature into projects ready for submission		0 p.a. (2023)	4 (2030)	TSG monitoring system
	RI: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	RCR 79 Interreg: Joint strategies and	0 p.a. (2023)	2 (2030)	MA monitoring system / survey

		action plans taken up			
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*: Horizontal topic expected result/target of the action

**: Cross-cutting topic expected result/target of the action

P1F3: Pillar 1 Flagship 3 for Topic 1.3, Action 1.3.1.

1.3.4 Action – Data exchange and knowledge sharing

	Description of the action				
Name of the action	Data exchange and knowledge sharing				
What are the envisaged activities?	Setting up a platform for information exchange and data sharing related to maritime spatial planning, terrestrial spatial planning and relevant activities in the field of sustainable blue economy				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinated spatial planning will allow the further development of sustainable aquaculture and other activities in the marine area. Lack of candidate countries compliance with the <i>EU acquis</i> in the field of fisheries, environmental protection, training and education etc. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved the evidence base for policy and decision-making in the region. Sharing data and knowledge among public bodies in the region can increase the efficiency of the public administration (e.g. by avoiding duplication of monitoring or data collection efforts). Increased in their capacity to seize opportunities or react to challenges which can be detected earlier if data and information are shared and analysed across countries. This may be done in cooperation with action 3.1.1. (Enhancing marine and coastal biodiversity). 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	Under the flagship ‘Bolstering Capacity Building and Efficient Coordination of Planning and Local Development Activities for Improving Marine and Maritime Governance and Blue Growth Services’ no strategic projects were developed so far.				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Pilot actions developed jointly and implemented in project ideas	RCO 84 Interreg: Pilot actions developed and implemented jointly	0 p.a. (2023)	1 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system
	OI: No. of new project ideas supported to mature into projects ready for submission		0 p.a. (2023)	2 (2030)	TSG monitoring system

	RI: Public institutions supported to develop digital services, products and processes	RCO 14 ERDF ⁶ : Public institutions supported to develop digital services, products and processes	0 p.a. (2023)	4 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system
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1.3.5 Action – Promote the development of skills and digital technological tools in the maritime industry and territorial spatial planning, governance and services

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Promote the development of skills and digital technological in the maritime industry and territorial spatial planning, governance and services
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network of training/education centres/technological and higher education institutes/industry to cooperate in development/sharing of blue skills programmes. • Encouraging networking and exchange in the planning and implementation of best practices. <p>Trans-regional cooperation between community-led local development strategies for actions implemented by fisheries local action groups.</p>
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlock the capacity needed at the regional and local level to deliver quality training and mobilise collaborating arrangements in order to anticipate and respond to the fast changing skills needs for skills on the labour market. • Urgent need for training in the use of new technologies, remote robotics, smart devices, etc. A special new workforce is emerging, which should handle these devices properly. • The green and digital transition processes are rooted in skills; therefore it is necessary to strengthen and create skills (upskilling and reskilling) in order to achieve transitions. <p>Many blue economy sectors have difficulties finding suitably skilled employees, which hampers their growth.</p>
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<p>This action will contribute to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the state of the maritime and marine environments through an increased uptake of digital technological tools and skills in maritime industry and territorial spatial planning which help to improve governance and planning processes^{P1F3}. • Improved Skills and career development in blue economy and strengthening of networks of academics, training organisations and professional organisations of maritime sectors in the region^{P1F3}. <p>Trans-regional cooperation between community-led local development strategies for actions implemented by FLAGs^{P1F3}.</p>
Strategy flagships and	Under Flagship ‘Bolstering Capacity Building and Efficient Coordination of Planning and Local Development Activities for Improving Marine and Maritime Governance

⁶ European Regional Development Fund

strategic projects	and Blue Growth Services', no strategic projects were developed so far.				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Pilot actions developed jointly and implemented in project ideas	RCO 84 Interreg: Pilot actions developed and implemented jointly	0 p.a. (2023)	5 (2030)	TSG & MA monitoring system
	OI: No. of new project ideas supported to mature into projects ready for submission		0 p.a. (2023)	8 (2030)	TSG monitoring system
	RI: Organisations cooperating across borders after project completion	RCR 84 Interreg: Organisations cooperating post-project	0 p.a. (2023)	10 (2030)	MA monitoring system / Survey

2. Pillar 2 – Connecting the region

The overall objective of Pillar 2 ‘connecting the region’ is to improve connectivity, integration, and cohesion within the Adriatic-Ionian region and with the EU regarding transport and energy programmes, initiatives, and projects. This objective is requiring thorough coordination of transport and energy policies and initiatives by countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region. Cooperation is envisaged on infrastructure developments and harmonised operation of transport and energy systems to build a region that is more inclusive, cohesive, and competitive.

The region is a geographically diverse place where coastal, mountainous, and insular areas demand investments on technical infrastructures, and many areas are still not well connected. The transport and energy systems of the region are fragmented and outdated. There is a clear need to accelerate the green transition and to cope with the challenge of global climate change while looking at an improved and streamlined governance of the transport and energy systems.

There is a significant potential for quality improvement and better integration of transport and energy systems, removing roadblocks to project investments, focusing on the enabling factors for the creation and development of regional enterprises along the free and regulated European market principles.

Various bottlenecks have limited the development opportunities stemming from the motorways of the sea. Railway transportation is lagging the EU average both in terms of infrastructure, as well as in freight and passenger volumes. In many countries, and especially in Western Balkans, there are inferior quality rail systems and unsafe roads. The network of airports has inadequate capacity to sustain tourism development and connectivity in general, mostly due issues concerning the economy of scale of the related catchment area. At the same time, connectivity is a key asset for Western Balkans within the enlargement process.

In the field of energy, connections can be improved to jointly address the transition towards decarbonised energy systems. Today, not so efficient usage of the existing grid interconnection capacities, preventing the trading activities from being increased and to share balancing reserves and energy to accommodate fluctuating energy from renewable sources is a factor limiting the development of renewable energy sources to a large scale. Hydropower is the most used type of renewable energy in the region. Even though the region has immense potential for the development of renewable energy sources notably, solar and wind energy, it performs below the EU average for solar and wind energy, eco-innovation, and energy efficiency. The Strategy should also ensure appropriate alignment with the National Energy and Climate Plans of the participating Member States.

National programmes and actions can only partially address all the challenges, due to the capital-intensive measures required to improve and upgrade transport and energy networks and systems. Even bilateral cooperation may not be sufficient to overcome bottlenecks and to promote connectivity and cooperation aimed at developing projects of joint interest. Wider macro-regional cooperation consultation and capitalisation are needed to provide services and benefits to the Strategy countries. Most major infrastructure projects and programmes only make sense if looked at from a well-coordinated macro-regional perspective.

In this light, the Strategy sets out to improve connectivity, integration and cohesion within the Adriatic-Ionian region and with the rest of the EU regarding transport and energy programmes and actions. This objective is requiring thorough coordination of transport and energy policies and initiatives, collaboration on infrastructure developments and delivery of transport and energy services. Relations with stakeholders and research of public consensus and support transport and energy infrastructures and projects will be a major concern. The experience of broad long-term frameworks programme studies will be continued. The intent is to update and expand along a three-year period or so studies such as the Strategy master plan on transport for the Adriatic and Ionian region, the Strategy master plan on energy networks for the Adriatic and Ionian region, the roadmap towards a Strategy power exchange and natural gas trading hub for the Adriatic and Ionian region. These framework studies aim at creating consensus on priorities, actions, while identifying problem areas and opportunities for convergence for projects and cooperation along short-term and long-term perspectives.

The Strategy master plan on transport will be updated and upgraded with a view to EU enlargement as envisaged by a key horizontal topic of the Strategy. This activity is cross-cutting the entire Topic 2.1, Topic 2.2 and Topic 2.3 of the action plan.

The specific objectives of the pillar are:

- T1- maritime transport: to strengthen safety and security of port operations and develop a competitive macro-regional interconnected port system;
- T2 – Multi-modal connectivity: to develop reliable multi-modal and intermodal connections with the hinterland, both for freight and passengers;
- T3 Urban nodes: to support the integration of urban nodes and regional transport systems into a greener TEN-T network;
- T4 Energy networks: to achieve a well-interconnected and well-functioning internal energy market supporting the three energy policy objectives of the EU, i.e. confronting climate change, enhancing security of supply and competitiveness;
- T5 Green energy: to confront the challenges of the energy transition towards decarbonised and resilient energy systems, while promoting renewable energy sources and energy efficiency.

In the electricity markets of the Adriatic-Ionian region, the ultimate objective is the development of a well-functioning electricity markets, underpinned by the development and integration of the wholesale market, removal of regulated retail electricity prices, the relieving of network congestions, integration of renewable energy sources into meshed power grids and unhampered cross-border exchanges of electricity, followed by market coupling of the electricity markets of non-EU participating countries with the EU Member States.

A substantial increase in installed capacity and generation from variable solar and wind power are expected in the coming years. Limited interconnection capacities and internal network capacities as well grid capacity to connect renewable energy sources in a large scale, as well as limited balancing resources and non-existence of integrated, liquid and well-functioning day-ahead, intra-day and balancing market, are limiting the development of renewable energy. The existing bottlenecks in the uptake and distribution of solar and wind power need to be thoroughly assessed and addressed.

Electricity infrastructure projects, identified under the EU Projects of Common interest/Projects of Mutual Interest and Energy Community Projects of Energy Community Interest, as well as the Central

and South-Eastern Europe Energy Connectivity action plan aim at connecting new renewable energy to the power grid, facilitate market activities and improving the reliability and quality of energy services. The interconnection of electricity grids and sufficient grid capacity are preconditions for large-scale investments in renewable energy and its deployment.

COP28 in December 2023 decided on the ‘transitioning away from fossil fuels by 2050’, so efforts should be dedicated to increasing the share of renewable energy sources. In the natural gas network, limited investments are required in gas transmission infrastructure, to address remaining bottlenecks. Only for facilities needed to meet immediate security of supply needs, natural gas is still viewed as a transient fuel enabling the transition towards decarbonised energy systems through the European Union by the year 2050. In general, lock-in technologies not compliant with the ‘do no significant harm’ principle⁷ should be avoided and conditions should be created according to a long-term perspective to shift away from natural gas to renewable and no-carbon gases, in particular biomethane, synthetic methane and hydrogen.

To this end, repurposing of existing gas pipelines for hydrogen transportation should be planned. Regarding natural gas use hydrogen – ready solutions should be envisioned as well as highly efficient cogeneration processes while carbon capture and sequestration technologies and the corresponding investments should receive consideration.

In the short term, increased supply of liquefied natural gas is still envisaged in countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region. Direct use of Liquefied Natural Gas for transport and process industry can also be a transient option because of its lower carbon content as compared with other hydrocarbon fuels. Liquefied Natural Gas terminals might serve as facilities for importing hydrogen in the future, however their potential and technical compatibility for conversion and repurposing is requiring in-depth analysis and simulations.

Based on already existing natural gas infrastructure and infrastructure in the Adriatic-Ionian region, and with the completion of a limited number of interconnectors in the Western Balkans region whose implementation is already ongoing among EU Projects of Common Interest, Projects of Energy Community Interest and REPowerEU Plan, Western Balkan countries will be able to diversify supply sources and routes and to enhance security of energy supply.

Along a mid-term perspective developing natural gas infrastructure would help currently isolated areas and regions to have access to natural gas supplies, to ensure continuous and secure supplies by having networks renovated and modernised, and to bring natural gas from a range of export markets via new routes (notably, the upgraded Trans-Adriatic Pipeline – TAP2). The TAP project has been implemented and its upgrading and doubling of capacity are in progress.

In addition, Liquefied Natural Gas infrastructure in ports and on land enabling new gas import routes and fuel switching to Liquefied Natural Gas would also benefit security of supply and improve environmental quality.

⁷ ‘do no significant harm’ means not supporting or carrying out economic activities that do significant harm to any environmental objective, where relevant, within the meaning of Article 17 of Regulation (EU) 2020/852. Only activities or assets assessed as not significantly harmful to any of the mentioned environmental objective can be considered compliant with the ‘Do No Significant Harm’ principle.

Based on the approach of the European Green Deal, the Communication from the European Commission ‘An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans’ with its guidelines for the implementation of the ‘Green Agenda for the Western Balkans’ are framing relevant actions on transport and energy while proposing improved connectivity competitive services and alignment with the *EU acquis*. To achieve its overall objective and specific objectives Pillar 2 will focus and organise according to five topics: Topic 2.1 Maritime transport, Topic 2.2 Intermodal connectivity, Topic 2.3 Urban nodes, Topic 2.4 Energy networks, Topic 2.5 Green energy. The description of the five topics is as follows.

2.1 Topic – Maritime transport

Global objectives. Developing maritime transport, in particular motorways of the sea as navigation corridors, is of paramount importance and must go together with the creation of modern and efficient intermodal ports integrating maritime transport with other transport modes such as rail and road. Such an extension of infrastructure and transport activities must be accompanied by a coherent sustainable transport plan linked, inter alia, to an air quality plan. Investments in innovation and modernisation of infrastructure, reduction of procedural constraints and bureaucratic burden (especially in port operations) and promotion of safe maritime traffic should be given priority in the entire sea basin.

Strategy objectives. The Strategy sets out to improve connectivity, integration, and cohesion within the Adriatic-Ionian region and with the EU. The focus is on the coordination of transport policies and initiatives by countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region, collaboration on infrastructure developments and harmonised operation of transport systems.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the scope above, challenges and opportunities, the activities under this topic aim at:

- increasing safety and security of port operations and resilience of infrastructure, through a vessel traffic monitoring and information system and investments in ports to increase safety, security and ports’ capacity and interconnectivity;
- improving the effectiveness of port infrastructure and equipment, hence the competitiveness of maritime transport services, through the interoperability of IT systems and solutions in ports including the development and/or improvement of Port Community System;
- greening ports and maritime transport and increasing the number of certified ports (ISO 14001, Port Environmental Review System and Eco-Management and Audit Scheme);
- removing roadblocks to project investments, focusing on the enabling factors for the creation and development of regional enterprises along the free and regulated European market principles;

2.1.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces several specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- A well-established network of motorways of the seas links, with further potential for growth.
- A dynamic port system interconnected to the most relevant TEN-T transport corridors.
- A multipurpose port system integrated in the regional economy and energy industry, located along the One Belt and One Road global initiative.
- Greening ports and maritime transport.

Challenges:

- Lack of safety and security in port operations and resilience of infrastructure.
- Lack of effectiveness of port infrastructure and equipment, hence the lack of competitiveness of maritime transport services.

2.1.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** In the context of transport policy (Chapter 14), enhancing and harmonising traffic monitoring and management within the ports of the Adriatic-Ionian region through the implementation of advanced technologies such as Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems and IT solutions holds significant potential. Improved traffic monitoring and management not only enhance the overall functionality of ports but also demonstrate a commitment to aligning with EU norms and regulations, making the transition smoother for potential accession.
Furthermore, the harmonisation of monitoring systems for emissions, water quality, and air quality in the Ports of the Adriatic-Ionian region is pivotal for aligning the candidate countries with EU environmental standards (Chapter 27) and for ensuring a sustainable and environmentally responsible approach to port operations, fostering seamless integration with EU Member States. The Strategy master plan on transport will be updated and upgraded with a view to the EU enlargement as envisaged by a key horizontal topic of the Strategy. This activity is cross-cutting with the entire Topic 2.1, Topic 2.2 and Topic 2.3 of the action plan.
- **Capacity building.** Improving IT solutions and implementing emission monitoring measures in the ports of the Adriatic-Ionian region enhance the region's maritime capabilities, providing valuable insights into traffic patterns, safety protocols, and navigation efficiency. This, in turn, contributes to capacity building by empowering port authorities with real-time data to make informed decisions and optimise operational processes.
Simultaneously, the monitoring of emissions aligns with contemporary environmental standards, promoting sustainability and responsible maritime practices. Furthermore, cooperation to improve vessel monitoring and emission control measures improve the capacity of the Adriatic-Ionian ports through knowledge sharing and the dissemination of successful strategies, and contribute to a more sustainable, efficient, and informed maritime environment in the broader context of the EU Green Deal.
- **Innovation and research.** Enhancing IT solutions for vessel monitoring and implementing emissions monitoring in the ports of the Adriatic-Ionian region can serve as a catalyst for

innovation and research. The integration of advanced IT solutions in maritime operations not only optimises efficiency but also provides a rich source of data for researchers to explore and analyse. Moreover, monitoring emissions in these ports could stimulate research into cleaner technologies, alternative fuels, and emission reduction strategies, promoting innovation in green shipping practices.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** The topic does not include a defined link to circular economy activities. However, advanced technologies, notably Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems can promote resource efficiency, reduce waste, and encourage the adoption of sustainable practices, aligning the sector with the broader goals of a circular and environmentally responsible economy.

The circular economy is centred on the concept of closing the loop, wherein resources are reused, recycled, and regenerated. Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems, alongside emission monitoring, contributes to this circularity by fostering a closed-loop approach in maritime operations. Efficient traffic management reduces unnecessary fuel consumption and associated emissions, while monitoring emissions directly addresses the environmental impact of shipping activities.

- **Green rural development.** The topic does not include an explicit link to green rural development activities, as it the focus is on maritime transport.
- **Digitalisation.** The implementation of Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems allows for real-time monitoring and tracking of vessel movements, enhancing overall safety, security, and efficiency in port operations. This not only streamlines maritime traffic but also ensures compliance with international maritime regulations. By adopting modern IT solutions, the Ports of the Adriatic-Ionian region can put in place a cohesive and interoperable framework, promoting seamless communication and data exchange among various stakeholders involved in port management.

The digital transition can be supported e.g. through activities related to use of joint monitoring systems, and more explicitly the identification of bottlenecks for the interoperability of IT systems and solutions in ports including the development and/or improvement of Port Community System.

2.1.3 Action – Improving and harmonising traffic monitoring and management

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Improving and harmonising traffic monitoring and management by expanding the use of vessel traffic monitoring and information system
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify areas with the prioritised needs for improving Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems. • Disseminate knowledge and good practices on Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems in the region. • Leverage investments in Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems. • Improving maritime safety in the region.
Which challenges and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction with ports authorities, ministries and stakeholders in many countries could be challenging.

opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities could come from the Interreg programmes funding pilot projects and creating network of stakeholders involved in the deployment processes. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	Improved safety and security of port operations and resilience of infrastructure and staff training programmes and initiatives.				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship 'The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors' and its component 'Green and Smart Ports'. Under this flagship the following master plan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 1 Maritime dimension 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Extension of areas in the Adriatic and Ionian Sea covered by Vessel Traffic Monitoring and Information Systems	<p>RCO 14 - Public institutions supported to develop digital services, products and processes</p> <p>RCR 11 - Users of new and upgraded public digital services, products and processes</p>	0(2023)	tbd	tbd
	Agreements and/or governance solutions among port authorities and key stakeholders to implement actions for improving and harmonising traffic monitoring and management	<p>RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed</p> <p>RCR 79 Interreg - Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations</p> <p>RCO 116 Interreg - Jointly developed solutions</p> <p>RCR104 Interreg: Solutions taken</p>	0(2023)	tbd	Tbd

		up or up-scaled by organisations			
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2.1.4 Action – Improvement of the interoperability of IT systems and solutions in ports

	Description of the action				
Name of the action	Improvement of the interoperability of IT systems and solutions in ports including the development and/or improvement of Port Community System				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade the Strategy master plan on transport with a focus on intermodality in the ports of the region. • Identification of bottlenecks for the interoperability of IT systems and solutions in ports including the development and/or improvement of Port Community System. • Identification of the areas with the biggest needs to investment. • Strengthen cooperation on port development. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop relevant staff training programmes and initiatives. • Digitalise port operations. • High procedural and bureaucratic barriers. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction of bureaucratic barriers. • Better collaboration between multiple players of the port industry leads to improvement of the effectiveness of port performance and the competitiveness of maritime transport services and staff training programmes and initiatives. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship ‘The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors’ and its component ‘Green and Smart Ports’. Under this flagship the following master plan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EUSAIR Master plan on transport – Vol. 1 Maritime dimension 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	IT systems by typology (e.g. for handling operations, intermodality, resource management, ...) developed in the Ports of the region (distinguishing by Port	RCO 116 Interreg - Jointly developed solutions RCR104 Interreg:	0(2023)	tbd	tbd

	dimension and typology)	Solutions taken up or up-scaled by organisations			
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2.1.5 Action – Improving monitoring of environmental quality in ports

	Description of the action				
Name of the action	Monitoring emissions, water quality and air quality				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disseminate knowledge on monitoring environmental quality in ports. Development of a monitoring system for emissions, water quality and air quality of ports in the region. Publication of annual monitoring reports. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The adoption of common/shared monitoring tools and procedures. Developed pilot projects for testing and for the diffusion of monitoring tools and procedure. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greener and smart ports. More certified ports (ISO 14001, PERS and EMAS). 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship ‘The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors’ and its component ‘Green and Smart Ports’. Under this flagship the following master plan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy master plan on Transport – Vol. 1 Maritime dimension 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Monitoring systems (for air and water quality) and protocols adopted in the Ports of the region (distinguishing by Port dimension and typology)	RCO 116 Interreg - Jointly developed solutions RCR104 Interreg: Solutions taken up or up-scaled by organisations	0(2023)	tbd	tbd
	Agreements among port authorities to implement, manage and	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans	0(2023)	tbd	tbd

	control emissions in the Ports of the region (same as above)	jointly developed RCR 79 - Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations			
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2.2 Topic – Multi-modal connectivity

Global objectives. A fully operational, multi-modal Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) for sustainable and smart connectivity is an objective set out in the EU ‘Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy’ and an important asset to achieving the objectives of the European Green Deal. A harmonised and interconnected transport network enhances the efficiency of cross-border movements, reducing transit times and trade barriers. Furthermore, increasing road and rail capacity responds to the growing demands of commerce and travel (Chapter 4). Upgrading and expanding transportation infrastructure not only accommodates rising traffic volumes but also enhances the region’s overall competitiveness, contributing significantly to the seamless integration of the region into the broader TEN-T (Chapter 21).

Strategy objectives. The objective of the topic is to foster the development of effective multi-modal connections, between maritime transport of passengers and goods with landside modes such as rail and road networks, as well as the connection to the main airport nodes. Ports and airports of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas are immediate entry points to the region from abroad, whereas inland waterways provide important international connections to/from the region. An appropriate transport policy must regard all these considerations promoting multimodality, while also considering environmental aspects (e.g. air emission), economic growth and social development.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, challenges and opportunities, the activities under this topic aim at:

new investment projects in ICT infrastructure to improve multi-modal connections;

- interoperable rail infrastructure and services among countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region to increase the rail connections between cities in the Western Balkans;
- increased rail transport capacity and quality thorough a reduction of missing links and bottlenecks and upgraded rail network of the region to TEN-T standards;
- increased road safety of rail and road networks.

2.2.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Rail infrastructure and intermodal nodes belonging to the TEN-T network and mostly to the TEN-T transport corridors.

- Growing positive trends in freight and passenger demand across Europe.
- Rail network already interconnected with most of the ports in the regions.
- Potential growth of air passenger traffic due to tourism activities.
- Increase rail transport capacity, quality and road and rail safety and resilience.

Challenges:

- Multiple and heterogenous transport operators (multi- modes, multi -countries).
- Lack of harmonised of regulation and services among countries.
- Lack of interoperability of infrastructure among countries.

2.2.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The implementation of ICT in transport infrastructure, coupled with efforts to enhance interoperability, increase road, and rail capacity, stands as a pivotal strategy to bolster the enlargement process of the European Union in the Western Balkans (Chapter 14). By embracing ICT solutions in transportation, the region can achieve heightened connectivity, real-time monitoring, and streamlined logistics. This not only facilitates the smooth flow of goods and people but also aligns the Western Balkans with the advanced technological standards of the EU. Interoperability, achieved through standardised systems and collaborative frameworks, further strengthens the Western Balkans' integration with the EU.
- **Capacity building.** The strategic implementation of ICT in transport infrastructure, coupled with a focus on interoperability and increased road and rail capacity, could contribute to capacity building in the Adriatic-Ionian region, since it not only enhances operational efficiency but also fosters continuous learning and skill development, laying the foundation for a well-equipped and knowledgeable workforce capable of managing the region's evolving transportation needs. By promoting ICT infrastructure and interoperability, the region is better equipped to build the collective expertise necessary for effective transportation management and optimisation.
- **Innovation and research.** The implementation of ICT transport infrastructure creates a data-rich environment that researchers can leverage to study and to develop innovative solutions for optimising logistics and traffic management. Interoperability enhancements encourage collaboration among transport stakeholders and the exchange of ideas for supplying new mobility services in the region. The Adriatic-Ionian region, with its diverse economic activities and geopolitical significance, can benefit from collaborative research efforts focused on ICT solutions in rail transport. Increasing road and rail capacity paves the way for research into novel technologies and sustainable practices, aligning the region with the latest advancements in transportation. Commitment to modern infrastructure not only stimulates local innovation but also attracts research initiatives and partnerships.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** The integration of ICT solutions into rail transport systems, such as smart sensors, predictive analytics, and digital communication, can enhance efficiency, and contribute to circular principles. In fact, streamlining logistics and enhancing overall supply

chain efficiency (e.g. minimising delays, reducing idle times, ...) optimises resource utilisation, fostering a circular economy by ensuring that transportation resources are used to their maximum potential. Optimising the performance of rail systems contribute to circularity by improving resource efficiency and minimising the environmental footprint associated with rail operations. Develop sustainable infrastructure, and increase the number of EMAS⁸ registered ports and maritime infrastructure.

- **Green rural development.** The topic does not focus on green rural development activities. However, improved multi-modal connectivity and especially road connectivity can also support the development of rural areas offering transport solutions improving overall accessibility.
- **Digitalisation.** The implementation of innovative ICT solutions in the realm of rail transport holds immense potential for fostering research and innovation in logistics optimisation, traffic management, and sustainable transportation practices. Researchers can explore ways to leverage ICT for real-time monitoring, predictive maintenance, and resource-efficient operations, contributing to advancements in transportation sector and novel approaches to design, construction, and maintenance. ICT solutions, such as advanced simulation models and digital twin technologies, can be employed to test and optimise various scenarios, enabling researchers to develop innovative solutions that enhance capacity while minimising environmental impact.

2.2.3 Action – Implementation of ICT infrastructure at nodes and along logistics chains

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Support the implementation of ICT infrastructure at nodes and along logistics chains, as well as systems interoperability in the Adriatic-Ionian region
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade the Strategy master plan on transport with a focus on intermodality along the logistics chains of the region. • Identify the areas with the highest need to the implementation of ICT infrastructure at nodes and along logistics chains. • Leverage investments in ICT infrastructure at nodes and along logistics chains.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse objectives and diverse infrastructure development among participating countries. • Extension of TEN-T railways corridors in the Western Balkans. • Identification of common priorities for the implementation of ICT solutions. • Development of measures for improving the logistic chains along the corridors.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase investments in ICT infrastructure. • Improve multi-modal connections to transport nodes. • Capacity build through staff training programmes and initiatives.

⁸ The EMAS Register is a voluntary tool designed by the European Commission for the registration and public recognition of those companies and organisations that have excellent environmental performance.

Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to the Strategy Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship ‘The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors’. Under this flagship the following master plan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 5 Rail and related intermodality 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Number of multi-modal hubs (for freight and passengers) in the region upgraded with ICT infrastructure and services	RCO 116 Interreg - Jointly developed solutions RCR104 Interreg: Solutions taken up or up-scaled by organisations	0(2023)	tbd	tbd
	Agreements and/or governance solutions within logistics clusters and along multi-modal routes, to develop and implement actions, including ICT for the promotion of multi-modal and intermodal transport and harmonised traffic monitoring and management	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR 79 Interreg - Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations RCO 116 Interreg - Jointly developed solutions RCR104 Interreg: Solutions taken up or up-scaled by organisations	0(2023)	tbd	tbd

2.2.4 Action – Upgrade of the network to provide continued and interoperable international rail links between countries

	Description of the action
Name of the	Upgrade of the network to provide continued and interoperable international

action	rail links between countries, also by drawing up integrated plans for infrastructure developments and drawing up joint roadmaps for investments				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade the Strategy master plan on transport with a focus on interoperability. • Support the railway connecting between the capital cities in the region. • Investments in upgrading rail infrastructure where needed (e.g. bottlenecks, single tracks, etc.) 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecosystem consisting of different rules, operators, interests. • The extension of TEN-T railways corridors in the Western Balkans that could help to identify common priorities. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interoperable rail infrastructure and services among countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship 'The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors'. Under this flagship the following master plan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 5 Rail and related intermodality 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Km or % (over total network extension) of interoperable rail infrastructure in the region (e.g. distinguishing by single vs double track; electrified vs not electrified, ...)	RCO 50 - Length of rail reconstructed or modernised - non-TEN-T RCR 58 - Annual users of newly built, upgraded, reconstructed or modernised railways RCR 101- Time savings due to improved rail infrastructure	tbd	tbd	tbd
	Daily Frequency or number of rail services between the main cities (e.g. the Capitals of the region)	RCR 58 - Annual users of newly built, upgraded, reconstructed or modernised railways	tbd	tbd	tbd

		RCR 101- Time savings due to improved rail infrastructure			
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2.2.5 Action – Increase rail transport capacity and quality in the region

Description of the action					
Name of the action	Increase rail and road transport capacity and quality (remove missing links and bottlenecks; complete rail reforms) in Strategy countries and upgrade the rail and road network of the region to TEN-T standards				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upgrade the Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 5 Rail and related interoperability. Analyse and list needs of transport capacity and quality in Strategy countries and potential for upgrade. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase rail transport capacity and quality. Preparation of projects and funding for the development of rail infrastructure (where needed) as a pre-condition to increase rail transport capacity. Creating agreements among rail transport operators to supply (cross countries) quality rail services is another critical and challenging issue. An agreement upon the standard is needed, as well as identifying who pays for subsidising the rail services. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased rail transport capacity and quality (solve missing links and bottlenecks; complete rail reforms) in Strategy countries and upgraded rail network of the region to TEN-T standards. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to the Strategy Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship ‘The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors’. Under this flagship the following master plan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 5 Rail and related intermodality 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	% of rail network in the region upgraded to TEN-T quality and safety standards (Core and Extended Core)	RCO 50 - Length of rail reconstructed or modernised - non-TEN-T RCO 49 - Length of rail reconstructed or modernised -	tbd	tbd	tbd

		<p>TEN-T</p> <p>RCR 58 - Annual users of newly built, upgraded, reconstructed or modernised railways</p> <p>RCR 101- Time savings due to improved rail infrastructure</p>			
	% of road network in the region upgraded to TEN-T quality and safety standards (Core and Extended Core)	<p>RCO 108 - Length of roads with new or modernised traffic management systems - TEN-T</p> <p>RCR 55 - Annual users of newly built, reconstructed, upgraded, or modernised roads</p>	tbd	tbd	tbd

2.3 Topic – Urban nodes

Global objectives. Sustainable urban mobility is a key objective of EU urban and mobility policies to enhance mobility and reduce congestion, accidents, and air pollution in urban areas. It aims at improving the overall quality of life for residents and commuters by addressing major challenges related to for example congestion, development of intermodality air/noise pollution, climate change, and road safety and, more generally, transport energy.

Strategy objectives. The objective of the topic is to foster the improvement of urban mobility solutions and transport systems tackling/anticipating the challenges and the already existing criticalities deriving from growing urbanisation (urban sprawl) and from some socio-economic (e.g. ageing population) and environmental trends, calling for a reduction of the impacts of passengers and goods mobility in the cities. The improvement of integrated local public transit systems (including 'last-mile' solutions, such as active mobility, micromobility, and shared mobility solutions) is essential to increase transport efficiency and to achieve the decarbonisation targets by the promotion of urban low -emission mobility, also in a cross-border framework.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, challenges and opportunities, the activities under this topic aim at:

- the adoption of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans for all urban nodes in the region to actively promote sustainable mobility solutions, and sustainable logistics measures;

- integrated public transport services solutions (including also fare structure) for the largest urban nodes, covering their functional urban areas, to increase the modal share of public transport;
- better coverage of bike lanes and networks (more km of cycling lanes) in all urban areas, connecting the cities with their commuting areas and measures to promote cycling, to increase bike modal share.

2.3.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces several specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- An extended network of urban nodes belonging to the TEN-T, according to the proposal for the revision of Regulation (EU) 1315/2013.
- Development of Multifunctional urban nodes, many of them also representing tourism attractions and/or classifiable as city-ports.
- Development of accessible and safe cycling solutions for local and tourist mobility.

Challenges:

- Lack of integration of local public transport networks with other services (the challenge that here is related to the preparation of projects and get the funds for the development of rail infrastructure (where needed) that is a pre-condition to increase rail transport capacity).
- In addition, creating agreement among rail transport operators to supply (cross countries) quality rail services is another critical and challenging issues. An agreement upon the standard is needed, who pays for subsidising the rail services, etc. are also particularly challenging. e.g. shared mobility services).
- Low level of road safety, particularly for vulnerable users.
- Improve road safety, particularly for vulnerable users.
- Development of accessible and safe cycling solutions for local and tourist mobility.

2.3.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans emphasise environmentally friendly transport solutions, aligning the region with EU sustainability standards (Chapter 27). The adoption of Mobility as a Service fosters efficient and integrated urban transport systems, demonstrating the Western Balkans' commitment to modern and interconnected urban mobility (Chapter 14). Additionally, investing in cycling infrastructure not only promotes healthy and sustainable commuting but also aligns the region with EU emphasis on alternative and green modes of transportation (Chapter 27). These measures collectively contribute to the harmonisation of transport practices, a key component in the Western Balkans' journey towards EU accession (Chapter 14).
- **Capacity building.** The implementation of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans offers a comprehensive framework for urban planners and policymakers to enhance their expertise

in sustainable urban development, fostering capacity building in local governance. By introducing innovative, technology-driven, and integrated transport solutions, Mobility as a Service encourages the development of skills and knowledge among professionals involved in urban mobility management. Investing in cycling infrastructure not only contributes to healthier and more sustainable transport but also supports capacity building by creating opportunities for training and expertise development in urban planning, transportation engineering, and alternative mobility solutions.

- **Innovation and research.** The implementation of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans, public transport single-ticketing platforms (including Mobility as a Service solution), and cycling infrastructure in the cities of the Adriatic-Ionian region would provide a fertile ground for research into novel technologies and urban planning strategies. Mobility as a Service introduces a transformative approach to transportation, encouraging research into seamless integration of various modes of transport and user-centric mobility solutions. The development of cycling infrastructure may stimulate innovation in urban design and safety measures, attracting research initiatives focused on enhancing the cycling experience and integrating it effectively into urban transport systems.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** The topic does not include any link to Circular Economy.
- **Green rural development.** Integrated public transport services may be extended beyond urban areas and support connectivity in the neighbouring rural areas.
- **Digitalisation.** The integration of public transport systems including fare and single ticketing systems will include the development of digital platform and data sharing systems. In fact, Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans leverage digital technologies to optimise urban mobility, fostering the integration of smart solutions for traffic management and data-driven decision-making. Mobility as a Service⁹ introduces digital platforms that seamlessly connect various transportation modes, providing users with real-time information and payment options through digital channels. Additionally, the development of cycling infrastructure may incorporate digital tools for route planning, bike-sharing systems, and safety measures, collectively contributing to the overall digital transformation of transportation in the region's cities.

2.3.3 Action – Boost the uptake of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan initiatives especially in urban nodes

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Boost the uptake of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans initiatives especially in urban nodes with strong urbanisation trends, including co-design of solutions for local mobility
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade the Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 7 Accessibility to urban nodes and tourist attractions. • Set up a Strategy peer to peer community on sustainable urban transport

⁹ **Mobility as a Service** integrates various forms of transport and transport-related services into a single, comprehensive, and on-demand mobility service. Mobility as a Service offers end users the added value of accessing mobility through a single application and a single payment channel (instead of multiple ticketing and payment operations).

	<p>plans.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a Strategy best practice handbook on sustainable urban transport plans. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen uptake of technological mobility solutions. Raising people awareness about the impact of sustainable urban mobility solutions on the environment and their daily activities. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Urban areas of the Adriatic-Ionian region have Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans. Sustainable mobility solutions and sustainable logistics measures promoted. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to the Strategy Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship 'The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors'. Under this flagship the following masterplan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 7 Accessibility to urban nodes and tourist attractions 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Number or % of cities in the region (e.g. with a population above 50 000 or 100 000 inhabitants) that have adopted a Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan according to EU guidelines	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR 79 Interreg - Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	tbd	tbd	tbd
	Extension (Km /per habitant) of Mass Rapid Transit (e.g. Tram, Metro, Bus Rapid Transit)	RCO 55 - Length of new tram and metro lines RCO 56 - Length of reconstructed or modernised tram and metro lines RCR 63 - Annual users of new or modernised tram and metro lines	tbd	tbd	tbd

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2.3.4 Action – Diffusion of integrated public transport system including integrated fare structures (Mobility as a Service)

	Description of the action				
Name of the action	Promote the diffusion of integrated fare and single ticketing solutions				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Upgrade the Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 7 Accessibility to urban nodes and tourist attractions. Initiate a Strategy peer to peer community on integrated fare and single ticketing solutions. Promote integrated public transport systems including fare and single ticketing solutions through Mobility as a Services platforms. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The challenge is the integration of local public transport networks and services, and integrated fare systems. The opportunity comes from the ongoing diffusion of Mobility as a Service platforms and Mobility as a Service operator. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing integrated fare and single-ticketing solutions within most urban and interurban areas, especially in Western Balkan countries. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to the Strategy Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship ‘The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors’. Under this flagship the following master plan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 7 Accessibility to urban nodes and tourist attractions 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Number or % of cities in the region that have adopted Mobility as a Service solutions or local public transport integrated fare systems (e.g. public transit and sharing mobility systems)	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR 79 Interreg - Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	tbd	tbd	tbd
	Number of Mobility as a Service operators in the region, distinguishing by	RCO 87 Interreg - Organisations cooperating	tbd	tbd	tbd

	extension of the services embedded in the Mobility as a Service platform, e.g. city-wide or region-wide including rural areas	across borders RCR 84 Interreg - Organisations cooperating across borders after project completion			
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2.3.5 Action – Support the realisation of cycling lanes and networks

	Description of the action				
Name of the action	Support the realisation of cycling lanes and networks and other measures for the promotion of cycling mobility				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upgrade the Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 7 Accessibility to urban nodes and tourist attractions. • Promote cycling lanes and networks. • Development of Strategy on long-distance biking routes (incl. EUROVELO network). 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of safe cycling solutions for local and tourist mobility. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good coverage with cycling lanes and networks in all urban areas and active measures for the promotion of cycling mobility. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>The action is strictly related to Pillar 2 (Transport sub-group) flagship ‘The Adriatic-Ionian Multi-Modal Corridors’ and its component ‘Adriatic-Ionian Cycle Routes’.</p> <p>Under this flagship the following masterplan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy master plan on transport – Vol. 7 Accessibility to urban nodes and tourist attractions <p>and the following Cross-pillar strategic projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADRIOCYCLETOUR - ADRIatic-IONian CYCLE route for sustainable TOURism (Pillars 2 and 4) 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source

How to measure the activities under this action?	Extension (Km /per habitant) cycling lanes in the cities of the region, by typology (e.g. segregated vs mixed use lanes, urban vs suburban ...)	RCO 58 - Dedicated cycling infrastructure supported RCR 64 - Annual users of dedicated cycling infrastructure	tbd	tbd	tbd
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2.4 Topic– Energy networks

Global objectives. Energy systems are made up of energy networks, energy markets and energy uses. The liberalisation and integration of the EU electricity and natural gas markets, pursued by the EU directives and regulations, contribute to security of supply, competitiveness, sustainability and affordability. The energy policy objectives of the EU – sustainability, security of supply, competitiveness and affordability – can only be achieved through a well-interconnected and well-functioning internal energy market.

Strategy objectives. The EU is committed to climate neutrality by 2050, as laid down in the Climate Law, responding to its obligations under the Paris Agreement and the Global Stocktake at COP28. One of the key objective of this topic is to reach these goals and phase-out fossil fuels. In this perspective and in view of the transition towards decarbonised energy systems to confront the climate change challenge, key objectives are to achieve well-interconnected and well-functioning energy systems and markets in the Adriatic-Ionian region, to foster security of energy supply, and to improve energy market competitiveness. Priorities are enacting the energy goals of the European Green Deal, RePower EU, and the Green Agenda for Western Balkans, while contributing to the energy transition, large-scale deployment of renewable energy sources compatible with the ‘Do No Significant Harm’ (DNSH) principle and the environmental *acquis*, increased electrification of the energy system, energy efficiency and resilience of sustainable energy infrastructure with a view to EU enlargement.

The focus is on the cooperation energy policies and initiatives by countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region, collaboration on infrastructure developments, in line with the Green Deal and RePower EU policies, and integration of energy markets regionally and with the EU.

The electricity and natural gas systems and markets in the Adriatic-Ionian region and even more in the Western Balkans region are in the process of integration, but several roadblocks still persist. Actions for greater integration will be addressed under this topic in cooperation with the Energy Community and European Commission services.

Fully integrated networks and markets are crucial for achieving security of supply, market integration, energy price competitiveness, convergence and affordability, at the same time paving the way for a future renewable hydrogen distribution. Investments would be public and private or both. Projects which have not secured sufficient public, or EU funding should be implemented through market-based instruments, such as incremental capacity processes, concessional agreements, own equity or support from commercial banks. Support and realisation of the projects within the different activities must be linked with the confirmation from the market and the relevant

institutions that these infrastructures are needed and funding will be secured through market mechanisms.

On 30 May 2022, the European Union adopted the Regulation (EU) 2022/869 on guidelines for trans-European energy infrastructure repealing Regulation (EU) No 347/2013.

On a proposal by the European Commission, on 14 December 2023 the Energy Community Ministerial Council followed by adopting a Decision adapting Regulation (EU) 2022/869 to the Energy Community to foster decarbonisation efforts of the Energy Community Contracting Parties in relation to energy infrastructure. This TEN-E Regulation sets out a revised regional cooperation framework for selecting and implementing key infrastructure projects necessary for achieving the 2030 and 2050 energy and climate targets and the European Green Deal. The TEN-E Regulation is key for accelerating investments in grid infrastructure. By including infrastructure for renewable and low-carbon gases (biomethane, biogas, renewable hydrogen), it will support the decarbonisation of gas markets and support the transformation of industrial clusters. The Energy Community Contracting Parties have to transpose the Regulation by end 2024. In parallel, the process for the selection of Projects of Energy Community Interest (PECI) has been launched early 2024 and in December 2024 the Energy Community Ministerial Council adopted the first PECI list¹⁰

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the scope above and the challenges and opportunities below, the activities under this topic aim at:

- developing integrated power networks and markets towards a green Adriatic-Ionian region based on renewable energies production and consumption;
- building interconnected energy systems and better integrated grids to support renewable energy sources;
- fostering energy market integration, energy competitiveness and security of energy supply of the Adriatic-Ionian region;
- removing roadblocks to project investments, focusing on the enabling factors for creation and development of regional enterprises along the free and regulated European market principles.

2.4.1 Strategy specificities opportunities and challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Connecting and integrating networks to reduce energy system vulnerability and risk of disruptions of energy supply.
- Enhancing cooperation on cross-border energy networks to allow for investments on large energy infrastructure which would find difficulties given the limited national outreach capacity. If these actions are not compliant with DNSH criteria and the environmental *acquis*, they won't be (co-)funded by EU programmes.

¹⁰ [ECS - Final Preliminary PECI list.pdf](#)

- Exploiting complementarities of the energy systems through the Adriatic-Ionian region to improve security and competitiveness.

Challenges related to electric power concern among others:

- Insufficiently integrated power grids and still fragmented market not fully supporting the energy transition of the Adriatic-Ionian region.
- Restricted electricity market activities in the Adriatic-Ionian region due to inefficient use and low exploitation of interconnections¹¹ as well as subsidies causing electricity market distortions.
- Regulatory and financial barriers that hinder electricity market integration as well as the functioning of power exchange through the Adriatic-Ionian region.
- Significant constraints in the existing electricity grid to accommodate generation of large amounts of electricity from intermittent renewable and distributed energy sources.

Further challenges:

- The credible implementation and enforcement of the EU directives and regulations under the Energy Community framework, in particular the Electricity Integration Package adopted in 2022, as relevant for facilitating development of more flexible and consumer-centred energy markets and their integration into the European single market for electricity.
- Prosperous business environment is required to attract investments for the development of networks and international and regional interconnections. Administrative delays and political volatility, which are recurrent phenomena in the Adriatic-Ionian region, are often regarded as a threat and deterrent to committing long-term investment on energy networks.
- Alliances, agreements, joint ventures amongst energy enterprises from countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region should be promoted and looked for to create larger and efficient regional industry players with a sufficient number of employees and international connections while facing technology innovations and economies of scale.
- Cybersecurity threats to power and natural gas networks and infrastructure, as well as to information systems used for providing essential services in the energy sector. Exceptional events due to global climate change with the consequent need for reducing vulnerability and ensuring early warning and continuity of energy services when facing incidents and disruptions.

2.4.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The activities help candidate countries to better integrate with EU Member States in field of EU energy policies, also including programmes and projects and their harmonisation and alignment to the EU directives and regulations. Enactment and

¹¹ The Clean Energy Package, with the new Electricity Regulation introduced a new regulatory framework for cross-border capacity allocation. Here, specifically Art. 16 is of high relevance as it requires TSOs to provide minimum levels of available capacity for cross-zonal trade (the so-called 70% rule).

implementation of cross-border interconnections and transnational energy infrastructures would contribute to the integration of non-Member States with the European Union. The creation of integrated markets within the Adriatic-Ionian region would enable cost reductions and regulatory alignment with the EU Member States while reducing risk in energy supply and distribution.

- **Capacity building.** The activities have a strong focus on capacity building to ensure relevant players are well informed and involved and the regulatory frameworks facilitate sustainable and efficient energy markets and systems. This includes, among other activities, joint capacity building and innovative solutions for implementing a common market and enhancing energy regulatory frameworks. Local energy enterprises may find new opportunities while creating joint ventures and merging into larger more efficient regional enterprises.
- **Innovation and research.** The activities will touch on innovation and research in various contexts, e.g. related to new technologies improving energy transmission and storage while activating measures for cybersecurity.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** The topic does not explicitly address circular economy. However, improving energy networks to support a green transition is also supporting the transition to a circular economy.
- **Green rural development.** Increased energy interconnections and power grid development would facilitate the inclusion of rural and remote areas into the main power and networks and infrastructure.
- **Digitalisation.** The digital transition and large-scale use of artificial intelligence are an integral part of the development of energy networks. Digitalisation and artificial intelligence would be a key asset and driver for the operation of the energy networks, for the management of spare capacity, deployment of smart power grids, prevention of human errors and recovery from accidents and failures.

2.4.3 Action – Integrated power networks and market supporting the green transition

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Integrated power networks and market supporting the green transition and security of energy supply of the Adriatic-Ionian region
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master plan 2026 of energy and energy networks for the Adriatic-Ionian region with time horizons the years 2030 and 2050. Activity cross-cutting Topic 2.4 and Topic 2.5 of the Strategy master plan. • Promoting projects supporting the Trans-Balkan Corridor by including new power transmission lines, reinforcements of existing lines to enable trade in electricity, grid stability and large-scale deployment and market integration of renewable energy sources. • Digitalising the power system, deploying and adopting smart electricity grids and smart grid technologies across the Adriatic-Ionian region to efficiently integrate the behaviours and actions of all users connected to the electricity network. In particular deploying demand response by consumers, energy storage, electric vehicles and increased electrification.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This would include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Increasing the existing Trans-Adriatic power interconnectors. b) Enhancing power supply for islands and islands systems where renewable energies can play a fundamental role. c) Promoting early warning and cybersecurity capabilities for the resilience of the power and electricity system when facing threats and incidents. • Road Map 2026 towards a Strategy Power Exchange and Natural Gas Trading Hub for the Adriatic-Ionian region Activity cross-cutting Action 2.4.1 and Action 2.4.2 of Topic 2.4 • Developing analysis and evaluating differences in the regional and national electricity markets, with respect to regulatory frameworks, market maturity and barriers to cross-border investments. Developing customised approaches to address these barriers while paying close attention to systemic market differences, while respecting requirements under the EU and Energy Community <i>acquis</i>. • Supporting joint capacity building and innovative solutions for the building of a common power market. • Creating a wholesale power market for the Adriatic-Ionian region¹² with steps envisioning market coupling with the EU, harmonising electricity grid tariff methodologies and grid codes addressing regulatory barriers, power purchase agreements and use of blockchain to facilitate electricity trading. The activity is including support to the flagship 'Power networks and markets for a green Adriatic-Ionian region'¹³ and joining the Joint Allocation Office when not in place for forward allocation and joining Single Day-Ahead Coupling and Single Intra-Day Coupling (SDIC) for electricity trade. • Implementing and operating the Balkan Energy Regulators School.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The challenge is the lack of well-functioning energy market to support the energy transition of the Adriatic-Ionian region. • Concurrent challenge is the restriction in electricity market activities in the Adriatic-Ionian region due to inefficient use and low exploitation of interconnections as well due to subsidies causing electricity market distortions. • The opportunity for all participating countries is to interconnect their power grids, as a means to optimise the deployment of low-carbon power generation other than hydropower, to maintain grid stability and security while expanding the use of intermittent and diversified power sources. Electricity storage, digitalisation of the power grid and smart grids offer opportunities for

¹² Electricity market coupling and balancing market integration according to steps including harmonisation of legislative and regulatory framework, addressing regulatory barriers, accelerating market coupling, power purchase agreements and use of blockchain to facilitate electricity trading.

¹³ It is in the interest of all participating countries to further interconnect their power grids, as a means to optimise the deployment of low-carbon power generation other than hydropower, to maintain grid stability and security while expanding the use of intermittent and diversified power sources. Electricity storage, digitalisation of the power grid and smart grids offer further opportunities for reducing costs and improving the service. Electricity market integration and, market coupling would be more efficient should investments in new power infrastructure become a reality.

	<p>reducing costs and improving the service.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The power networks can have an impact on nature and biodiversity. New power grid should avoid as much as possible degradation of ecosystem, particularly in Natura 2000 areas and plan for appropriate mitigation measures. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring full implementation of relevant EU and Energy Community <i>acquis</i> to allow for further market integration within the region. Possibility for the electricity grid to accommodate the generation of large amounts of electricity from intermittent renewable and distributed energy sources. Removal of regulatory barriers hindering energy market integration as well as the functioning of power exchange through the Adriatic-Ionian region. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under flagship POWER NETWORKS AND MARKET FOR A GREEN ADRIATIC- IONIAN REGION the following masterplan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy MPEN – master plan of energy networks for the Adriatic-Ionian region with time horizons the years 2030 and 2050 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
	OI. Number of completed or implemented transnational interconnectors and links for the Trans-Balkan Electricity Corridor	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders RCO117 Interreg: Solutions for legal or administrative obstacles across border identified	0 (2023)	2 (2027)	TSG
	OI. Master plan 2026 on energy and energy networks for the Adriatic-Ionian region. Activity is cross-cutting Topic 2.4 and Topic 2.5	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed	Master plan 2023	1 (2026)	TSG2
	RI: The strategy master plan 2026 on Energy would update and upgrade the 2023 master plan on energy networks for the Adriatic and Ionian region with a view to EU enlargement as	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	Master plan 2023	1(2026)	TSG2

	set out by a key horizontal topic of the Strategy. Time horizons are the years 2030 and 2050. Activity is cross-cutting the entire Topic 2.4 and Topic 2.5 of the action plan.				
	OI. Roadmap 2026 towards an electricity market and natural gas trading hub for the Adriatic -Ionian region. Activity cross-cutting Action 2.4.1 and Action 2.4.2	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed	Update(2023)	1 (2026)	TSG
	OI. Operation of the Western Balkan Energy Regulators School	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	1(2025)	TSG
	RI. Improved electricity interconnection in the region with reduced electricity cost, sharing spare capacity and increased supply reliability with a view at the horizontal topic of EU enlargement	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders RCO117 Interreg: Solutions for legal or administrative obstacles across border identified	0 (2023)	1(2027)	TSG
	RI. Deciding on priorities with a view at different shared policy scenarios according to a long-term perspective (years 2030 and 2050 as the time horizon)	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed	0 (2023)	1 (2027)	TSG
	RI. Integration of power and natural gas markets of the region in view of integration with the EU internal energy market. First achievements expected: market coupling with the	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions	0 (2023)	1 (2027)	TSG

	EU, implementing the EU legal framework on risk preparedness in electricity security of supply. Energy market integration is key element to the horizontal topic of EU enlargement. Activity is cross-cutting Action 2.4.1 and 2.4.2.				
	RI. Training of energy (electricity and natural gas) regulators from the Adriatic and Ionian region according to shared principles, methodologies and criteria with a view at the integrated energy networks through the region and compliance with EU directives and regulations. Activity is cross-cutting Action 2.4.1 and Action 2.4.2.	RCO81 Interreg: Completion of joint training schemes	0(2023)	1(2025)	TSG

2.4.4 Action– Integrated energy corridors

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Completion of the integrated energy corridors, infrastructure and market supporting the energy transition and short-term security of energy supply of the Adriatic-Ionian region¹⁴
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Master plan 2026 of energy and energy networks and road map 2026 towards energy market activity as under Action 2.4.1. Subject to market interest and financial viability, and in view of the need to avoid stranded assets, supporting projects concerning cross-border energy infrastructure, including completion of limited number of gas infrastructure projects for the security of immediate supply if adapted to future needs (e.g. renewable hydrogen). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Promoting and implementing interconnection between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina b) North Macedonia natural gas interconnectors with Greece and

¹⁴ Monitoring the implementation and conclusion of projects already approved and supported by the EU - through the TEN-E, RRF, Energy Communities, etc.- to ensure the energy transition.

	<p>Serbia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c) New Compressor Station in Sulmona and Minerbio-Sulmona gas pipeline as part of the Adriatica Line project d) Expanding of the Krk Liquefied Natural Gas terminal in Croatia with related natural gas network reinforcement e) Developing the East-Med Gas Pipeline depending upon their continuing strategic interest and changing geopolitical context. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting projects increasing gas storage capacities and their flexibility, and reverse flows for security of immediate supply and competitiveness (not eligible under EU co-funding instruments). • Developing and implementing pilot projects for adapting and repurposing natural gas networks and infrastructure to transport of renewable and low-carbon gases. • Promoting cybersecurity capabilities for the resilience of the natural gas system when facing threats and incidents. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Challenge is to address the insufficiently integrated energy corridors and infrastructure with a view at the energy transition of the Adriatic-Ionian region. • Concurrent challenge is lack of readiness of the regional gas infrastructure for hydrogen. • The opportunity for all participating Countries is promoting the creation of integrated energy corridors, infrastructure and market supporting the energy transition and security of energy supply of the Adriatic-Ionian region. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The expected result is the planning for readiness of the regional gas infrastructure for biomethane and hydrogen and the need to identify priorities for future investments in energy infrastructure. • Other result is the removal of regulatory barriers that hinder energy trading through the Adriatic-Ionian region. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under flagship INTEGRATED NATURAL GAS CORRIDORS AND MARKET FOR A GREEN ADRIATIC- IONIAN REGION the following action plan was developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy AP - Action plan (Road Map) towards a Strategy Power Exchange and Natural Gas Trading Hub 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
	OI. Operating Floating Storage and Regasification Units in the Adriatic-Ionian Sea Expansion of the Krk Liquefied Natural Gas terminal	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions	0(2023)	1 (2026)	TSG
	OI. Pilot projects for	RCO90 Interreg:	0 (2023)	1(2029)	TSG

	adapting and repurposing natural gas transport infrastructure to non-carbonated gases.	Projects for innovation networks across borders RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions			
	RI. Improving Liquefied Natural Gas delivery and security of supply	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions	0 (2023)	1 (2027)	TSG
	RI. The EU objective is at decarbonising the energy systems through the EU and candidate countries by the year 2050. Decarbonisation is mandatory. The pilot project might involve all the interested countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region.	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions RCO90 Interreg: Projects for innovation networks across borders	0(2023)	1(2027)	TSG

2.4.5 Action– Liquefied Natural Gas logistics and infrastructure¹⁵

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Liquefied Natural Gas direct use, logistics and infrastructure, for marine and road transport, as well as other use (notably in process industry), to ensure short-term security of supply.
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting agreements between Port Authorities of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas on logistics for the deployment and use of Liquefied Natural Gas as a fuel for maritime transport. Designing, constructing and operating a network of Liquefied Natural Gas refuelling stations along blue corridors for road heavy transport and rail transport. Promoting simulations and analyses of existing Liquefied Natural Gas terminals and storage facilities on their capability to receive hydrogen, biomethane and synthetic methane. Projects are planned for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Marine and road truck engine conversion to the Liquefied Natural Gas use as a fuel; b) Direct small-scale Liquefied Natural Gas use in process and gas-intensive

¹⁵ Ensuring that all EU countries have access to Liquefied Natural Gas markets is a key objective of the EU's energy union strategy as it can contribute to diversifying gas supplies, thus improving EU energy security in the short term, while more sustainable solutions towards full decarbonisation by 2050 are established.

	<p>industries and applications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting to the flagship project on the 'Development and operation of logistics for direct Liquefied Natural Gas use as clean fuel for the Adriatic-Ionian region'. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The challenge is to introduce and deploy Liquefied Natural Gas as a transient fuel in the Adriatic-Ionian region to improve short-term security of energy supply while allowing a reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions along a mid-term perspective. Other challenge is to make plans for repurposing the Liquefied Natural Gas infrastructure to renewable fuels and hydrogen, biomethane and synthetic methane in the future. The opportunity for all participating Countries is to enable and benefit from the deployment of small-scale direct use of Liquefied Natural Gas as a transient fuel option for the region requiring existing and new logistics and infrastructure which would be converted to delivery and use of hydrogen and other non-carbonated gas in the future. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deployment and use of Liquefied Natural Gas as a new energy option for security of supply and diversification through the Adriatic-Ionian region. Planning for converting the Liquefied Natural Gas supply and use infrastructure to future deployment of hydrogen and non-carbonated gas. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	Under flagship DEVELOPMENT AND OPERATION OF LOGISTICS FOR DIRECT Liquefied Natural Gas USE AS A CLEAN FUEL FOR THE ADRIATIC-IONIAN REGION no strategic implementation formats were developed yet.				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
	OI. No. of agreements on Liquefied Natural Gas logistics between Port Authorities through the Adriatic and Ionian Seas signed.	RCO87 Interreg: Organisations cooperating across borders	0(2023)	1(2028)	TSG
	OI. Blue corridors and logistics for the use of Liquefied Natural Gas in road transport: preliminary design of Liquefied Natural Gas logistics.	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions	0(2023)	1(2028)	TSG
	OI. Converting Liquefied Natural Gas infrastructure to deployment of non-	RCO84 Interreg: Pilot actions developed and implemented	0(2023)	1(2028)	TSG

	carbonated gases. No of pilot projects for hydrogen use	jointly			
	RI. Agreement on the use of Liquefied Natural Gas as clean fuel for the marine transport would facilitate the adoption of Liquefied Natural Gas and other clean fuels through the Adriatic and Ionian Seas while harmonising safety requirements and logistics. Result is cross-cutting Topic 2.1 and Topic 2.2 of Pillar 2.	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed selections	0(2023)	1(2026)	TSG
	RI. Blue corridor for road transport implying Liquefied Natural Gas refuelling stations and cross-border agreements. Result is cross-cutting Topic 2.1 and Topic 2.2 of Pillar 2.	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0(2023)	1(2026)	TSG
	RI. Non-carbonated gases are key to the transition towards a net-zero carbon energy system. Pilot projects using existing or new Liquefied Natural Gas infrastructure would provide background and means towards the goal of decarbonisation.	RCO84 Interreg: Pilot actions developed and implemented jointly	0(2023)	1(2027)	TSG

2.5 Topic – Decarbonising the energy systems

The leading objective is confronting global climate change while accelerating the transition towards decarbonised energy systems in the Adriatic-Ionian region, enhancing security of energy supply and delivery, granting affordable and equitable energy access for all consumers. Priorities are enacting the energy goals of The European Green Deal, REPowerEU and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. The decarbonisation of the energy systems and the transition towards net-zero carbon economies will entail large-scale deployment of renewable energy sources and other low-carbon

energy options, improved energy efficiency, increased electrification and potentially the development and use of renewable hydrogen for hard-to-abate industries. Energy technology innovation and digitalisation will be key drivers.

New market structures and technologies that are developed and deployed would imply a new organisation of the energy systems. In the past energy systems were based on long-distance energy networks and concentrated energy supply while the future will see more distributed and local energy production and delivery. During the past few years, active consumers such as prosumers, energy communities and demand-side participants have emerged that contribute to more efficient decentralised markets and networks management. For these market participants to become an integrated part of the energy system, any development of energy infrastructures should take them involved and into account. The transition towards decarbonised energy systems might require new forms of governance of the transition. Cooperation in the development and implementation of National Energy and Climate Plans is planned. The objective under this topic is to exchange experiences and consultation between and among countries from the Adriatic-Ionian region on the governance for the energy transition and public acceptance. Ad hoc analyses and studies can be planned. Pillar 3 and Pillar 5 might have a role and contribute.

Global objectives. The commitment to tackling the existential triple environmental crisis (climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, all driven by natural resources depletion) is this generation's defining task. The European Green Deal was presented as a new growth strategy that aims at transforming EU Member States and EU candidate countries into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use. This green strategy also aims to protect, conserve, and enhance the Adriatic-Ionian region's natural capital, and protect the health and wellbeing of its citizens from environmentally related risks and impacts. At the same time the transition should be just and inclusive. It must put people first, and pay attention to the local communities, industries and workers who will face the greatest challenges. Since it will bring substantial change, active public participation and confidence in the energy transition is paramount if policies are to work and be accepted.

Strategy objectives. It is assumed that the Adriatic-Ionian region should develop a collective ability to transform its economy and societies to follow a more sustainable energy path. Delivering substantial reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions is a challenge. It will require massive public investment and increased effort to direct private capital towards climate and environmental action, while avoiding lock-in into unsustainable practices. The Adriatic-Ionian region should be able to coordinate and promote its efforts towards building a coherent financial public-private system that supports sustainable solutions. These investments should also be an opportunity to put the Adriatic-Ionian region firmly on a new path of sustainable and inclusive growth while enhancing security of energy supply and delivery and ensuring affordable energy access and equity. Energy efficiency improvements should be considered with a view to enhancing security of supply and to achieving a better degree of energy independence and to protect the environment.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, and the challenges and opportunities below, the activities under this topic aim at:

- increasing the share of renewable energy in the energy mix across the Adriatic-Ionian region;
- improving and enhancing energy efficiency of the economies of the Adriatic-Ionian region, through better energy use and management and thus reducing the energy intensity, in terms of the energy required for GDP unit;
- introducing and deploying renewable hydrogen in the energy mix (particularly for the decarbonisation of hard-to-abate industries) while increasing cooperation on advanced energy technologies in the Adriatic-Ionian region;
- promoting better cohesion through the development of energy communities in the Adriatic-Ionian region;
- ensuring affordable energy supply by fighting energy poverty and protecting energy consumers.

2.5.1 Strategy specificities opportunities and challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities which the action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Exploiting the potential of renewable energy sources in the Adriatic-Ionian region, while respecting the environment (e.g. minimising land use, avoiding biodiversity and pollution harm, prioritising circular economy solutions). Specifically, solar energy, onshore and offshore wind power hydropower and possibly geothermal energy are expected to make a substantial share in the future electricity mix. Furthermore, advanced biofuels would have a role in transport and other use.
- Providing the economies of the Adriatic-Ionian region (in several cases with significantly lower GDP per capita than the EU average) with opportunities for international investors in the green energy sector, while ensuring that transparent and reliable regulatory frameworks are in place.
- Making the transition to a renewable-based energy supply and to high energy efficiency driven by domestic resources can enable countries to capture increasing shares of the energy value added chain within the Adriatic-Ionian region, progressively build domestic technological capacity and turn the energy system into a driver of clean economic growth, and social cohesion.
- Accelerating the deployment of renewables energies in the Adriatic-Ionian region and increasing energy efficiency are a cost-effective strategy to reduce dependency on energy imports and improve the security of supply. At the same time, expanded electrification of the energy system with renewable energy sources would allow the phasing out of coal uses as well as avoiding further investments in redundant natural gas infrastructure, which would be at high risk of becoming stranded if the Adriatic-Ionian region is to meet the goals of The European Green Deal. Deployment of flexibility resources would also enable better integration of renewables into the existing energy systems.

Challenges:

- Reforming regulatory and administrative procedures to streamline the integration of renewable energy sources in spatial plans while promoting coordination of renewable energy sources regulations between and among countries.

- Removing undue restrictions to the deployment of renewable energy sources (in particular fossil fuel subsidies) grid integration restrictions, streamlining functional power exchanges, socio-economic and environmental barriers.
- Reducing the high energy intensity of several participating countries. Reducing energy intensity is the challenge. Efficient energy use should be promoted as a means for environmental protection and economic competitiveness.
- Increasing share of greenhouse-gas emissions from the energy sector per GDP unit in some countries from the Adriatic-Ionian region with consideration for the high dependency of energy sectors on fossil fuels (i.e. lignite) and hydropower (affected by impacts due climate change and potential conflicts with Water Framework and Habitats Directives).
- Accelerating the transition towards a net-zero carbon economy to decarbonise the energy systems while promoting security of energy supply and delivery, energy affordability and access.
- Reducing the cost of energy transition to low-carbon technologies, stranded assets and stranded costs emerging from the phasing out of coal-using facilities and producing areas.
- Dealing with the more vulnerable energy customers (due to the possibility of increasing energy prices) in cooperation with Pillar 5.

Further challenges:

- Creating an energy technology innovation facility or hub for the Adriatic-Ionian region with contribution and cooperation from all the participating countries while exploiting existing capabilities.
- Ensuring fair supply of strategic materials and critical components for the energy transition.
- Allowing for compensation and mitigation mechanisms for stranded costs and stranded assets resulting from an accelerated energy transition.
- Promoting the creation of new industrial players in the Adriatic-Ionian region to design and construct green facilities and supply energy-efficient systems.
- Providing energy supply and delivery with security and resilience against cybersecurity threats.

2.5.2 [Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics](#)

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The shared commitment to large-scale development and deployment of renewable energies and energy efficiency is a key element for the integration of EU candidate countries into the common energy market. Net-zero carbon energy systems by the year 2050 are the ultimate goal while the national energy systems should be organised accordingly. The National Energy and Climate Plans represent a step forward in the process of EU enlargement which is followed by candidate countries. The enactment of activities under the topic Green Energy would provide a clear contribution.
- **Capacity building.** The activities planned under the present topic require appropriate governance and organisation of the energy system to involve the relevant players from administrations and industry. In particular, the large-scale deployment of renewable energies

and energy efficiency are demanding information, initiatives and implementation at local scale within a meshed and distributed energy system where new types and forms of capacity building are at its background. Energy communities for the deployment and use renewable energies and energy efficiency are representing a promising advancement.

- **Innovation and research.** The activities which are proposed under this topic have their ground on energy technology innovation and technology advancements are expected. Cooperation and collaboration on energy technology innovation and research and demonstration will be promoted while participating countries are invited to share information and practice on their best cases and experiences regarding the deployment of renewable energies and energy efficiency.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** Connecting system models/initiatives (such as Climate-KIC) to support implementation of circular economy in participating countries and value chain development are expected under the present topic. In particular, circular economy and its principles are a driver for energy efficiency through the life cycle of goods, appliances, and industrial equipment. Clear synergistic interactions are expected. The deployment of renewable energy will take into account circular economy principles (e.g. longer lifetime, repairability, reuse and recycle of materials).
- **Green rural development.** The deployment of renewable energies would contribute to green rural development activities. Supporting smart community/village and energy communities in rural areas would increase self-sufficiency, attractiveness, and sustainable development of the rural areas (also using experiences made in other macro regions). The development of advanced second-generation technologies for the energy use of biomass¹⁶ might represent a valuable asset for some rural areas depending on local circumstances and potential economic and environmental benefits.
- **Digitalisation.** It is assumed that the transition towards green energy and a net-zero carbon economy according to the long-form perspective and commitments can find a driver in the digital transition and progressive digitalisation of the energy system. Vice versa the energy transition will promote further digitalisation in the economy and extended use of artificial intelligence. Applications of artificial intelligence and blockchain are envisaged. Artificial intelligence will be a key instrument in the operation, management and maintenance of remote renewable energy systems while artificial intelligence would also entail a new generation of energy-efficient applications and arrangements in the residential, transport, industrial and services sectors.

2.5.3 Cooperation in deployment of renewable energy sources in the Adriatic-Ionian region

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Cooperation in deployment of renewable energy sources in the Adriatic-Ionian region

¹⁶ In line with the sustainability and greenhouse-gas-emission-saving criteria set in the revised Renewable Energy Directive (EU/2023/2413).

<p>What are the envisaged activities?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master plan 2026 of energy and energy networks for the Adriatic-Ionian region. Activity as under Action 2.4.1. • Convening a Strategy Conference for Cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region to Confront Global Climate Change Challenge. Cooperating in the development and implementation of National Energy and Climate Plans with a view at decarbonising the energy system, energy security and sustainability. Activity cross-cutting the entire Topic 2.5. • Preparing a Renewable Energy Roadmap for the Adriatic-Ionian region while mapping the renewable energy potential, identifying implementation challenges and barriers to renewable energy sources. • Promoting and guiding the use and production of renewable energies in the residential, transport, industry, and services sectors. • Integrating and managing renewable energy energies into existing energy systems and cooperating for the establishment of a comprehensive investment and regulatory framework. • Supporting and creating energy communities according to the EU directives and regulations. Promoting cooperation and exchange of experiences amongst energy communities as well as through macro-regional networking and best practice sharing. • Support projects of biomass refineries for production of advanced biofuel. • Cooperation envisaged and new projects would include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Supporting alignment of countries from the Adriatic-Ionian region with the <i>EU acquis</i> related to the decarbonisation of the energy systems under the Energy Community. b) Cooperating on low-carbon and de-carbonised district heating solutions as well projects for desalination of sea water. c) Cooperating in fund-raising and joint regional project proposals on renewable energy sources. d) Exploring opportunities offered by European initiatives (such as the 'Coal regions in transition', Western Balkan Economic and Investment Plan, European Climate Pact) for encouraging best practice sharing, capacity building and cooperation during the phasing - out of coal - fuelled power plants and process industry. e) Implementing the project for 'Harnessing Offshore Renewable Energy Potential in the Adriatic and Ionian Sea'.
<p>Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The challenge is how to promote and guide large-scale deployment and use of renewable energy sources through the Adriatic-Ionian region in particular for power production. • Opportunities for all participating countries are offered by solar photovoltaic power, wind onshore and offshore power, advanced biofuels, geothermal energy in addition to hydropower. • Other opportunities would be offered by new arrangements for renewable energy exploitation and use such as the energy communities, batteries and other flexibility resources.
<p>What are the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expected results include security of energy supply and reduced share of

expected results/targets of the action?	<p>greenhouse-gas emissions through the Adriatic-Ionian region.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other results would entail formation of new enterprises and new human resources with challenging prospects of employment. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	/				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Strategy Conference on Global Climate Change	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	Concept (2023)	1(2025)	TSG2
	RI: Aim of the Conference is at presenting problems, options, and solutions on how to confront the climate change issue for the Adriatic and Ionian region while developing harmonised positions and approaches. Cross-cutting aspects with Topic 2.4, all aspects of Topic 2.5 and Pillar 3 are relevant for the horizontal topic of EU enlargement.	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	Concept (2023)	1 (2025)	TSG2
	OI: Renewable Energy Roadmap for the Adriatic and Ionian region – study completed.	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed	Concept (2023)	1(2025)	TSG2
	RI: Focus of the renewable Energy Roadmap is at opportunities for progress and prospects of renewable energies in the region. Options for streamlining siting and operation are set out. Result is needed to cope with the horizontal topic of EU enlargement.	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	Concept (2023)	1 (2025)	TSG2
	OI: Development of project for biomass	RCO81 Interreg:	0(2023)	1(2026)	TSG2

	refinery for biofuel production.	Participation in joint actions across borders			
	RI. Second-generation and advanced use of biomass would have a role within the expanded energy production and use of renewable energies in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Biorefineries appear at the technological frontier.	RCO116 Jointly developed solutions	0(2023)	1(2027)	TSG2

2.5.4 Action – Improving energy efficiency in the through action and cooperation

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Improving energy efficiency in the Adriatic-Ionian region through action and cooperation
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master plan 2026 on energy and energy networks for the Adriatic and Ionian region. Activity as under Action 2.4.1. • Convening a Strategy Conference for Cooperation in the Adriatic-Ionian region to Confront Global Climate Change Challenge. Activity as under Action 2.5.1. • Organising permanent Strategy forum on energy efficiency for the Adriatic-Ionian region to promote and foster macro-regional cooperation in all efficient energy uses, energy-efficient housing and industrial processes, energy-efficient public buildings and services, energy-efficient mobility. This would include cooperation on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public lighting, telemetering and monitoring energy delivery and use, energy-efficient city planning. • Domotics, heat pumps, energy-efficient heating and cooling for buildings and residential purposes. • Shared recommendations and standards to combine energy efficiency measures with applications of renewable energies for residential purposes and services sector. • Electric vehicles, low-carbon fuels and hydrogen for transport and mobility. Activity cross-cutting with Topic 2.2 and Topic 2.3. • Strengthening macro-regional cooperation on energy programmes and plans. This would include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing administrative, legal and financial barriers to speed up a renovation of public and private buildings, including cooperation and sharing of best practices in designing innovative financing schemes. • Cooperating in the development and implementation of national energy end-use building and industry renovation strategies. • Supporting macro-regional networking, best practice sharing, capacity building and project development with energy efficiency. • Developing and implementing energy communities to empower local stakeholders by improving their capacities in exploiting renewable energy

	<p>sources and increasing energy efficiency on a local scale. Energy communities will rely upon bottom-up approaches including engagement of enterprises and enhanced mutual trust of local authorities and citizens who want to create instruments aimed at boosting the energy transition. Activity will be shared by Action 2.5.1 and Action 2.5.2.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating and harmonising through the Adriatic-Ionian region instruments aimed at fighting energy poverty and ensuring continuing and sustainable access to energy for the isolated communities and vulnerable consumers groups notably, the elders and disabled consumers, persons under medical care requiring constant electricity supply, the poor, populations impacted by natural disasters (e.g. floods and earthquakes). Cooperation with Pillar 5 – Improved Social Cohesion is planned to promote these aims. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The challenge is reducing energy intensity of participating countries, notably of countries where energy intensity is well above the EU average standards. • Concurrent challenge is to develop norms and regulations to facilitate the introduction of energy-efficient practices including digitalisation of the energy system. • Opportunities are offered by gains in economic competitiveness and reduced energy cost. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removal regulatory, political, financial, technical, socio-economic and environmental barriers to the deployment of energy-efficient technologies and their acceptance including electric vehicles. • Alignment of energy-use efficiency through the Western Balkan region to the EU average standards. • Introduction of means to exchange information on energy-use best practice while sharing expertise. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	/				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Strategy forum on energy efficiency.	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0(2023)	3(2027)	TSG2
	RI: Improved efficiency through the entire energy system is key to align countries with the average EU energy	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by	0(2023)	1 (2027)	TSG2

	efficiency standards while preparing for the EU enlargement according to a horizontal topic of the Strategy. The Forum will focus on solutions, shared practice and procedures. Pilot projects would be launched.	organisations			
	OI: Establishment of energy community in the Western Balkan region.	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0(2023)	2(2027)	TSG2
	RI: Energy communities for energy efficiency and renewable energy sources are planned by new EU directives and financial support. The activity will contribute to the alignment of countries from the Western Balkan region to the best practice adopted by EU member states according to the horizontal topic of EU enlargement.	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0(2023)	2 (2027)	TSG2

2.5.5 Action – Promoting advancements on energy technologies and hydrogen economy

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Promoting advancements on energy technologies and hydrogen economy
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening cooperation on advanced and sustainable energy technologies (energy efficiency and renewable), energy technology innovation and R&D while promoting effort towards the establishment of an energy technology innovation facility or hub for the Adriatic-Ionian region, notably for the Western Balkans region. Advancing electricity storage, fuel cells, superconductivity, artificial intelligence uses through the energy systems. Promoting renewable hydrogen production and use through different technologies and systems. Developing alternative Renewable Fuels of Non-Biological Origin (RFNBOs) for transport, as well as renewable hydrogen transport and storage, renewable hydrogen use in the main energy, transport and consuming sectors. Activity partially cross-cutting with Topic 2.2 and Topic 2.3). This would include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Preparing a hydrogen production and deployment roadmap for the Adriatic-Ionian region with focus on opportunities, roadblocks, potential industry players and R&D needs;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b) Building hydrogen logistics, transport and storage; c) Deploying renewable hydrogen fuels, RFNBOs use in the transport and main energy-consuming sectors; d) Developing of integrated hydrogen systems while including advanced biofuels and RFNBOs for sectors without alternatives (aviation and maritime transport). e) Supporting the North Adriatic Hydrogen Valley project as well as other hydrogen projects as an open-ended hydrogen valley to test and demonstrate feasibility of hydrogen economy and technology; • Projects for exploiting advanced digitalisation techniques and artificial in the energy systems. • Cooperating on advanced nuclear fission power and nuclear fusion, including R&D and new technologies for secure exploitation of nuclear energy with a view at new generation nuclear power plants and small modular reactors while exploring prospects for nuclear fusion. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The challenge is accelerating the transition towards a net-zero-carbon economy. • Concurrent challenge is maintaining and improving during the energy transition security of energy supply and delivery, energy affordability and access. <p>Opportunities are offered by energy technology progress and advanced solutions including the production and use of renewable hydrogen and other low-carbon fuels.</p>				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prospects for hydrogen production and use, including the creation of 'Hydrogen Valleys' • Forms of cooperation between countries of the Adriatic-Ionian region on new and advanced energy technologies to exploit results and foster entrepreneurship. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	/				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Creation of energy technology innovation hub with focus on the partner countries.	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed	0(2023)	1(2027)	TSG2
	RI: Countries notably from the region lack capacity to innovate key energy technologies (including energy storage, carbon capture and storage systems, fuel cells and so forth) and to deploy the best solutions. The energy technology	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0(2023)	1 (2027)	TSG2

	innovation hub and new cooperation agreements would fill the gap.				
	OI: North Adriatic Hydrogen Valley supported and outreach action completed.	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	Definition (2023)	1(2026)	TSG2
	RI: The North Adriatic Hydrogen Valley as well as other hydrogen valley through the Adriatic and Ionian region are proposed for an outreach action with a view at the proposed European Bank on Hydrogen.	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	Definition (2023)	(2026)	TSG2
	OI: Advanced digitalisation of the energy system -. two pilot projects on digitalisation and artificial intelligence for the energy system developed.	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	Concept (2023)	2(2027)	TSG2
	RI: Digitalisation and artificial intelligence are cross-cutting topics for the Strategy. Two pilot projects on advanced digitalisation techniques and applications will be designed and implemented according to a cooperative approach involving interested participating Countries.	RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0(2023)	2(2027)	TSG2

3. Pillar 3 – Environmental Quality

The Adriatic-Ionian region contains unique ecosystems. Overall, the Adriatic-Ionian region has a rich biodiversity in comparison to the average European region, with many species. All countries of the macro-region provide habitats for Europe's large carnivores, including the wolf, the Eurasian lynx, and the brown bear. These species require large habitats to sustain viable populations, and cooperation is therefore needed on joint management and on ensuring that infrastructure investments will not result in significant fragmentation of important landscape features.

The Adriatic flyway is one of the main routes for millions of migratory birds crossing the Mediterranean, with birds making a resting stop along the eastern Adriatic. Several bird species also spend the winters in the area. The sparse number of undisturbed wetlands on the eastern coast of the Adriatic, lack of hunting ban areas and hunting rules which are not in line with EU legislation, (as well as low enforcement of the rules in place) result in vulnerable, threatened, or endangered migratory bird species being killed. This has impacts for the entire EU, as efforts to protect species breeding risk are being undone if protection is not ensured during migration¹⁷.

The Adriatic-Ionian region is increasingly vulnerable due to human expansion and climate change effects, including rising sea levels, erosion, marine encroachment, saltwater infiltration, water shortages, droughts, and biodiversity loss. There's escalating strain on coastal zones and their communities at both national and cross-border scales. Climate change amplifies these vulnerabilities and risks. Maintaining healthy ecosystems is crucial for human health, water, food, energy, climate, and biological safety. Such ecosystems are pivotal for sustainable growth and are at the heart of a sustainable blue economy.

The marine realm, a vast canvas of wonder and enigma, faces mounting challenges from human actions. The intricate marine life balance is jeopardised by numerous human-induced factors. Maritime transport, especially, has a significant footprint on the marine environment. The Adriatic and Ionian Seas are major conduits for worldwide maritime activities. While ships enable global commerce as they navigate these seas, they unintentionally affect marine habitats. High-traffic maritime pathways, particularly in the Adriatic-Ionian region, are accident hotspots, posing threats of mishaps, oil discharges, and marine life disruptions. Recognising these dangers, national bodies are proactively devising strategies to lessen maritime traffic's adverse effects, especially in high-risk areas.

Overfishing is another major issue. Historically viewed as an inexhaustible resource, recent data indicates the seas are not limitless. Fishing, vital for coastal populations and the global food network, has consequences. Overharvesting marine resources disrupts marine food chains. Accidental catches of non-targeted species compound the issue, often resulting in dwindling numbers of marine mammals, birds, and other unintended catch species.

¹⁷ The EU introduced the 'EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030' in response to the European Green Deal. It aims to create a comprehensive Trans-European Nature Network, legally protecting at least 30% of land and sea, with one third under strict protection. This was endorsed by the EU Council of Ministers in October 2020.

Pollution from terrestrial sources is a significant marine challenge. Coastal zones, teeming with human activities, often discharge contaminants into the seas. These pollutants, from farm runoff to industrial emissions, can harm marine organisms. Effective waste handling, especially along coastlines, is crucial, underscoring the importance of holistic approaches to address this problem.

Invasive foreign species also pose a threat to marine environments. These species, when introduced to unfamiliar territories, can dominate, prey on, or introduce illnesses to indigenous species, often causing major ecosystem shifts. Some marine conservation zones have acknowledged this risk, allowing regulated removals to oversee and limit invasive species numbers. It's our shared duty to ensure future generations inherit vibrant seas, not barren waters.

The Strategy aims to address environmental issues faced by the macro-region will contribute to implementing the *EU environmental acquis*, particularly the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, the biodiversity strategy for 2030, Maritime Spatial Planning, EU Water Framework Directive, Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, Nitrates Directive, Waste Framework Directive, Birds and Habitats Directives, Common Fisheries Policy, EU action plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries as well as the EU green infrastructure strategy. The Strategy is important sub-regional approach to enhance and complement regional activities (Barcelona convention) ^[108]

Marine protected areas are vital for marine environment conservation and are part of broader environmental law measures. The EU's focuses on the legal framework for creating and managing new protected areas. Under the Birds and Habitats Directives, EU Member States must designate areas to protect endangered species and habitats. The Natura 2000 network is a significant global network for safeguarding nature in the EU.

However, there are gaps in protecting marine elements like certain fish species, invertebrates, and offshore habitats under the current directives. The EU Commission opts for a practical approach, emphasising Natura 2000's broad coverage. The Habitats Directive also influenced the Berne Convention, which laid the groundwork for the EU's Nature directives. But their implementation varies due to different legal systems.

The EU introduced as well the 'EU biodiversity strategy for 2030' in response to the European Green Deal. It aims to create a comprehensive Trans-European Nature Network, legally protecting at least 30% of land and sea, with one third under strict protection. This was endorsed by the EU Council of Ministers in October 2020. The EU has adopted the Nature Restoration Law on 17 June 2024 to contribute to the continuous, long-term and sustained recovery of biodiverse and resilient nature across the EU's land and sea areas through the restoration of ecosystems. The law lays down a framework in which Member States will put in place restoration measures which together must cover at least 20% of the EU's land and sea areas by 2030 and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. This builds on the headline ambition set out in the biodiversity strategy that by 2050 all ecosystems are restored, resilient and adequately protected, and that, as a milestone, Europe's biodiversity is on the path to recovery by 2030. It is recognised that restoring nature will significantly contribute to the EU's climate mitigation and adaptation objectives, to prevent and mitigate the impact of natural disasters, and to the EU's international commitments.

Pillar 3 builds on past period 2020–2023 when flagships were designed and approved and are recognising the vital eco system services important for the sustainable development. The

preservation of these is essential to Europe's natural heritage and requires joint action and cross-sectoral cooperation (Pillar 3 matrix approved by the Strategy's Governing Board in 2018) from the countries concerned. Several countries of the region are home to shared eco-regions stretching across borders. These eco-regions include the Illyrian deciduous forests, and the Dinaric Mountains and the Pannonian mixed forests.

Reference should be made to the fact Adriatic sub-regional cooperation has been in the past, even outside the Barcelona Convention (institutional) framework, particularly accentuated in the field of protection and preservation of the marine environment. However, prior to 1990, and particularly due to the isolationistic policy of Albania, this was understood as a de facto cooperation between Italy and the former Yugoslavia. The two States took active part in the existing Mediterranean cooperative arrangements which included, beside the Barcelona system, also the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, in the field of fisheries, and the Mediterranean Science Commission (CIESM), in the field of marine scientific research, while specific sub-regional forms of cooperation were primarily aimed at supplementing those already existing at the regional (Mediterranean) level.

The actions included in Pillar 3 represent a selection considered by the Thematic Steering Group. Additional ideas for actions under this pillar are available in annex **Error! Reference source not found.**. The main topics covered under this pillar are:

- Topic 3.1 - Marine and coastal environment
- Topic 3.2 – Transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity

3.1 Topic – Marine and coastal environment

Global objectives. Mitigation of/and adaptation to climate change might be possible by conserving and sustainably using the ocean and marine resources for sustainable development. Ensuring good environmental and ecological status of the marine and coastal environments in line with post-2020 biodiversity targets of the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, the relevant *EU acquis*, the ecosystem approach roadmap of the Barcelona Convention and looking towards the 2030 targets in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (specially the 30x30 target). This also includes also addressing threats to marine biodiversity and ensuring safety and security of green and blue corridors. And to contribute to the aim of the EU biodiversity strategy that Europe's biodiversity will be on the path to recovery by 2030 for the benefit of people, climate, and the planet, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and with the objectives of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change.

Strategy objectives. Therefore, the objective of this topic is to strengthen the collaboration in the Adriatic-Ionian region in improving the marine and costal environment as well as biodiversity and ecosystem services. This includes a range of different issues where joint or harmonised efforts to analysing risks, mapping, monitoring, awareness raising, and action are required. Efforts are needed to capitalise on existing networks, platforms and on results from EU-funded projects, especially in the context of the Interreg ADRION Programme. This topic is also to be seen in the context of strengthening circular economy activities in the region.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, and the below challenges and opportunities, the activities under this topic aim at:

- improving biodiversity and ecosystem services in the Adriatic-Ionian region, through better monitoring and management of the coastal and marine biodiversity and better coordination in the fields of maritime spatial planning and integrated coastal zone management;
- reducing the amount of microplastics, oil spills and other pollutants in seawater, leading to improved water quality and reduced risks to human health and marine life;
- reducing the introduction and spread of non-native species and pollutants into the sea;
- adapt to new natural and biodiversity reality due the climate changes issue;
- increase work on blue and green corridors to achieve good environmental status and ensure safety and security management on that regard.

3.1.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- The Adriatic-Ionian region contains unique marine and inland ecosystems, including karstic regions and tectonic lakes.
- The Adriatic and Ionian region is characterised by rich marine and coastal biodiversity. The Adriatic Sea hosts nearly half of the recorded Mediterranean marine species and several marine protected areas.

Challenges:

- Adverse impact of fishing, extraction, and other human activities, especially on sensitive species and seabed habitats.
- Aquaculture is a rapidly growing industry but regulations ensuring its sustainability vary widely across countries.
- Excessive, uncontrolled, and illegal coastal development often leads to destruction of habitats and to the loss of the natural capacity of coastal territories to adapt to changes (resilience).
- Increasing numbers of invasive alien species in farming activities where regulatory frameworks are lacking and ballast water discharge can pose a threat to the ecosystem.
- Intense maritime transport activities and hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation result in oil spills, including large-scale pollution events, and noise pollution, could potentially, if undertaken without adhering to the appropriate environmental standards.
- Insufficient wastewater treatment in several participant countries leads to pollution from rivers, exacerbated by use of nitrates on agricultural lands. Pollution is also caused by ecologically unsound aquaculture practices and excessive use of chemical and pharmaceutical products.
- Marine litter stemming both from land and sea-based sources, such as lost and discarded fishing gear and recreational activities poses a severe problem. There is insufficient marine and riverine litter monitoring.
- The increasing number of offshore wind turbines and solar farms (floating or fixed) presents a new challenge in terms of spatial planning and the marine environment.

- Recognise environmental and climate changes risks to be able to implement Preventive actions on adaptation to climate change and prevent other environmental disasters.
- Measures/interventions to adapt to climate change are insufficient, considering that the Mediterranean has been identified as a hotspot by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.
- There is a need to broaden and improve the coverage of habitat maps of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, marine and maritime monitoring, and cross-border data exchange.
- Coverage in terms of offshore Marine Protected Areas beyond 12 nautical miles is the lowest of all EU marine regions, while existing Marine Protected Areas are sometimes not adequately managed. There is also an insufficient integration between marine conservation and marine spatial planning processes.

3.1.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** In the context of the Strategy action plan's 'Marine and Coastal Environment' topic, the activity under the 'Enlargement' horizontal topic focuses on collaborative efforts with EU candidate countries to enhance marine ecosystem protection. This collaboration aims to harmonise marine conservation policies and practices across the region, aligning with Chapter 27: Environment of the *EU acquis*. Key areas of focus include marine biodiversity conservation, pollution control, and sustainable fisheries management. The expected result of this activity is to **strengthen regional cooperation in marine conservation and achieve harmonised policies across the EU Member States, San Marino, and candidate countries.**
- **Capacity building.** Under the 'Capacity Building' horizontal topic in the Strategy action plan, an activity has been designed to enhance the capabilities of local communities, authorities, and stakeholders in managing marine and coastal environments sustainably. This involves comprehensive training programmes, workshops, and seminars covering marine biodiversity conservation, sustainable fisheries management, pollution control, and coastal ecosystem protection. These educational initiatives aim to empower local actors with the necessary skills and knowledge for effective environmental stewardship. Aligned with Chapter 27: Environment of the *EU acquis*, this capacity-building activity seeks to significantly improve local and regional capacities in sustainable marine and coastal ecosystem management. The progress and effectiveness of this initiative will be measured by the number of training programmes conducted and the observed improvements in management practices.
- **Innovation and research.** Under the 'Innovation and Research' horizontal topic in the Strategy action plan, there is a dedicated activity focused on promoting innovation and research to address marine and coastal environmental challenges. This involves the development of advanced technologies and methods for controlling marine pollution, with a particular emphasis on oil spill detection, plastic waste management, and sustainable fisheries. This activity aligns with Chapter 27: Environment of the *EU acquis*, which encourages innovative approaches to environmental conservation. The expected results include the development and implementation of innovative technologies and practices that will significantly improve marine conservation efforts and enhance pollution control.

This topic, as well as related actions are connected to green transition challenges and needs as they face environment degradation and contribute to strengthen climate action.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** In the realm of Circular Economy, particularly under the Marine and Coastal Environment, a pivotal activity involves the enhancement of recycling initiatives coupled with a concerted effort to reduce waste in coastal regions. This initiative aligns seamlessly with the Environment chapter of the *acquis*, emphasising Waste Management and the principles of the Circular Economy. The primary goal of this activity is to promote a decrease in marine pollution, concurrently driving an upsurge in recycling rates within coastal communities. This integrated approach not only addresses the immediate environmental concerns but also fosters a sustainable model for marine and coastal conservation.
- **Green rural development.** As part of green rural development within the marine and coastal environment, an essential activity focuses on supporting sustainable agricultural practices in coastal rural areas, aimed at minimising runoff and pollution. This activity is linked with the chapters of the *acquis* concerning Agriculture and Rural Development, as well as Water Quality.
- **Digitalisation.** For Digitalisation in the Marine and Coastal Environment, a key activity involves the development of community-based applications and platforms dedicated to coastal conservation and awareness. This initiative aligns with the Digital Agenda and Civic Participation chapters of the *acquis*, emphasising the role of technology in civic engagement. The expected results from this undertaking include enhanced public engagement in coastal conservation efforts and more effective dissemination of information related to coastal environmental issues.

3.1.3 Action – Enhancing coastal and marine biodiversity

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Enhancing marine and coastal biodiversity
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of sustainable blue economy of the Adriatic-Ionian region by implementing Integrated Coastal Zone Management and Maritime Spatial Planning including area-based conservation-management measures. • Establishment and further development of coastal and marine biodiversity information networks and platforms for data and information exchange for all relevant players. This will be conducted in constructive interaction with platforms already existing at Mediterranean level, through the INFO/Regional Activity Centre of the Barcelona Convention. • Deciding on priorities for new spatial protection of regional importance in contribution to global and EU targets for biodiversity including identifying joint approach on the conservation measures with neighbouring countries. • Research activities to develop knowledge on status of habitat types and species and identifying restoration activities for reaching good environmental status of marine ecosystems monitoring activities for migratory marine species, including monitoring of threats and pressures and activities to address them Promote the development of ecosystem services. • Expanding the network of Marine Protected Areas.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperation in management of marine protected species and of invasive alien species. This may be done in cooperation with Action 3.1.3.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development of measures/interventions to adapt to climate change, considering that the Mediterranean has been identified as a hotspot by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Development of habitat maps coverage of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, marine and maritime monitoring, and cross-border data exchange. Overfishing, where it occurs, habitat degradation, and incidental catches pose serious threats to marine biodiversity. Monitoring and enforcement, in some cases, are insufficient. Development of management of offshore Marine Protected Areas beyond 12 nautical miles is the lowest of all EU marine regions (focus on, existing Marine Protected Areas and integration between marine conservation and marine spatial planning processes). Excessive, uncontrolled, and illegal coastal development often leads to destruction of habitats and to the loss of the natural capacity of coastal territories and ecosystems to adapt to changes (resilience). The increasing number of offshore wind turbines and solar farms (floating or fixed) represents a new challenge in terms of spatial planning and the marine environment. Mitigate the impacts of offshore renewables and adapt them to the needs of nature protection, like e.g.: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Potential use of subsea offshore wind park infrastructure as artificial reefs and breeding grounds for marine species, while fulfilling all applicable environmental standards and ensuring proper environmental monitoring; b) Testing nature restoration methods for management of degraded ecosystems; c) Deploying new methods and technologies for environmental monitoring and management and mainstreaming successful approaches in line with approached and methodological standards developed under the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved biodiversity and ecosystem services in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Better management of the coastal and marine biodiversity and better coordination in the fields of maritime spatial planning and integrated coastal management. Improved habitat maps, monitoring, and cross-border data exchange.
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under flagship 'Promotion of Sustainable Growth of the Adriatic-Ionian region by Implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona Convention and the Monitoring and Management of Marine Protected Areas', the following strategic projects were developed:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ICZM and MSP - To promote a sustainable growth of the AI region by implementing ICZM and MSP also to contribute CRF on ICZM of Barcelona convention

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3MPS Monitoring and management of marine protected species <p>Cross-pillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CROSS-PILLAR ICZM&MSP - Using high-quality research to strengthen dialogues and institutional capacities for effective implementation of MSP/ Integrated Coastal Zone Management in support of inclusive and sustainable growth in the AIR (Pillars 1 & 3) 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Number of transboundary cooperation events in the field of MSP	n.a.	(2023)	TBD	EU Countries: TSG3 questionnaire
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participations in joint training schemes	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	TBD(2030)	TSG 3
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participation in joint actions across borders	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 (2023)	TBD (2030)	TSG 3
	RI: Biological diversity is maintained or enhanced. The quality and occurrence of coastal and marine habitats and the distribution and abundance of coastal and marine species are in line with prevailing physiographic, hydrographic, geographic and climatic conditions				Annex I DIRECTIVE 2008/56/EC and Decision IG.26/3 COP Barcelona Convention

3.1.4 Action – Reduction of the pollution of the sea and inland waters

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Reduction of the pollution of the sea and inland/transition waters
What are the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooperation on the assessment of the status, target setting, monitoring,

<p>envisaged activities?</p>	<p>reporting and implementation of measures related to marine litter and micro litter.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise awareness about pollution deriving from maritime traffic and marine litter from ships. • Support the implementation of the Adriatic-Ionian sub-regional oil spill contingency plan (REMPEC). • Support for development of suitable measures, practical solutions, and policy recommendations for the reduction of chemical and pharmaceutical substances in agriculture/aquaculture practices. • Sharing of best practices in the field of waste management, including marine litter.
<p>Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marine litter stemming both from land and sea-based sources, such as lost and discarded fishing gear and recreational activities poses a severe problem. There is insufficient marine and riverine litter monitoring. • Microplastic pollution in seawater threatens human and ecosystems health with unknown impacts. • Intense maritime transport activities and hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation could potentially, if undertaken without adhering to the appropriate environmental standards, result in oil spills, including large-scale pollution events, and noise pollution. • The Adriatic-Ionian region is characterised by high-traffic maritime pathways that are accident hotspots, posing threats of mishaps, oil discharges, and marine life disruptions. • Oil spills pose significant risks to marine ecosystems, habitats, and species. Developing and approving oil spill contingency plans supports efforts to mitigate these risks and protect vulnerable coastal areas, including sensitive habitats, Marine Protected Areas, and fisheries grounds. • Monitoring the number of oil spill contingency plans reflects compliance with different regulatory requirements (like International Convention on Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Cooperation and the EU Directive on Maritime Spatial Planning) and demonstrates progress in implementing best practices for oil spill management. • Agricultural nutrients and contaminants runoff to rivers and their consequent load in coastal waters, as well as the laying of a submarine pipe in the intertidal area to connect an offshore oil and gas platform to the terrestrial pipeline network.
<p>What are the expected results/targets of the action?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint measures, such as clean-up programmes, addressing marine litter stemming from land-based sources, lost and discarded fishing gear, and recreational activities. • Awareness-raising campaigns directed to managers, drivers and users of tourist boats. • Reduction in the amount of microplastics and other pollutants in seawater, leading to improved water quality and reduced risks to human health and marine life. • Activities supporting the implementation of the sub/regional oil spill

	contingency plan (REMPEC) for the Adriatic-Ionian region. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved of monitoring and the knowledge base of nutrient flows and load, to enable better decision-making and more targeted interventions. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	Under flagship Implementation of Adriatic-Ionian Sub-regional Oil Spill Contingency Plan' - ASOSCoP the following strategic projects were developed: Monopillar strategic projects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NAMIRS – North Adriatic Maritime Incident Response System (Grant agreement for project under DG ECHO – Union Civil Protection Mechanism: NEATNESS - clean the Adriatic and the Ionian sea from the plasticS) 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participation in joint actions across borders	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 (2023)	tbd (2030)	TSG 3
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participations in joint training schemes	RCO85 Interreg: Participation in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	tbd (2030)	TSG 3
	OI: Number of events on pollution deriving from maritime traffic and marine litter from ships	Completion of joint training schemes (RCR81)	0 (2023)	3 (2023) TBD	TSG 3 questionnaire
	RI: Marine litter does not adversely affect the coastal and marine environment				Decision IG.26/3 COP Barcelona Convention Annex I DIRECTIVE 2008/56/EC
	RI: Concentrations of contaminants are at levels not giving rise to pollution effects				Decision IG.26/3 COP Barcelona Convention Annex I DIRECTIVE 2008/56/EC
	RI: No. of dissemination events of the REMPEC contingency plan	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG 3 questionnaire

		jointly developed			
		RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations			
	RI: Human-induced eutrophication is minimised, especially adverse effects thereof, such as losses in biodiversity, ecosystem degradation, harmful algal blooms and oxygen deficiency in bottom waters		? (2023)	TBD (2030)	Decision IG.26/3 COP Barcelona Convention Annex I DIRECTIVE 2008/56/EC

3.1.5 Action – Reduced pollution through ballast water and other releases in the sea and water

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Reduced environmental problems deriving from ballast water and other releases at sea from inland/transition waters
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise awareness about environmental problems from ballast water and other releases at sea and inland/transition water. Promote the use of technical equipment on ships for cleaning ballast water. Support the introduction of ship tracking by discharge via the Common Information Sharing Environment system at the Maritime Administration.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing numbers of non-indigenous species from other release (e.g. farming activities) where regulatory frameworks are lacking, and ballast water discharge threaten ecosystems. Intense maritime transport activities and hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation, could potentially, if undertaken without adhering to the appropriate environmental standards, result in oil spills, including large-scale pollution events, and noise pollution.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced introduction and spread of non-native species and pollutants into the sea. Better environmental status of the sea. Increase safety and security in the blue and green corridors to achieve good environmental governance.
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	/

Indicators How to measure the activities under this action?	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
	OI: Number of events for better environmental status of the sea	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG3 questionnaire
	OI: No. of dissemination events on the IMO Guidelines t	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG 3 questionnaire
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participations in joint training schemes	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	tbd (2030)	TSG3
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the development of strategies and action plans	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed	0 (2023)	tbd (2030)	TSG 3
	RI: Non-indigenous species introduced by human activities are at levels that do not adversely alter the ecosystems.				Annex I DIRECTIVE 2008/56/EC and Decision IG.26/3 COP Barcelona Convention

3.2 Topic – Transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity

Global objective. Transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity is increasingly under threat, due to human activities. Declining biodiversity and climate change effects are mutually reinforcing. This pillar sets out to strengthen the collaboration in the Adriatic-Ionian region in improving the marine and coastal environment and transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity, by further strengthening the development and use of common platforms for data exchange and joint monitoring, supporting the implementation of Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) and Integrated Coastal Zone Management, also at cross-border and transnational level, strengthening the exchange of experience, and the development of innovative solutions in the region. Actions will ensure that the results of existing cooperation efforts are disseminated and capitalised.

Strategy objective. Therefore, the objective of this topic is to address threats to terrestrial biodiversity and contribute to the aim of the EU biodiversity strategy, so that Europe's biodiversity will be on the path to recovery by 2030 for the benefit of people, the planet, the climate and

economy, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and with the objectives of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. In the context of the Adriatic-Ionian region the aim is to protect and enhance natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems with particular attention to the ecological connectivity of blue and green corridors/infrastructure.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, challenges and opportunities, the activities under this topic aim at:

- reducing conflicts between humans and large carnivores, among others through improving institutional capacities;
- rehabilitating and restoring sites and habitats for migratory water birds occurring within the Adriatic-Ionian region, and developing harmonised research and monitoring methods; and
- improving the management of nature resources in protected areas and harmonisation of national and transnational policies on management, including more environmentally friendly farming practices, and better analysis and implementation of climate-related risk mitigation and adaptation measures.

3.2.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces several specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- The Adriatic-Ionian region contains unique ecosystems, including karstic including transboundary underground water bodies and habitats and tectonic lakes.
- The Adriatic-Ionian region provides habitats for Europe's large carnivores, including the wolf, the Eurasian lynx and the brown bear.
- The Adriatic flyway is one of the main routes for millions of migratory birds crossing the Mediterranean, with birds making a resting stop along the eastern Adriatic. Several bird species also spend winter in the area.

Challenges:

- Negative effects of human activities on transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity (e.g. land-use intensification and fragmentation), i.e. long-term viability of (large) carnivores' populations is threatened by habitat fragmentation and destruction due to urbanisation, farming and linear infrastructure.
- Insufficient integral natural reserves and connections between protected areas in coastal, transitional environment and wetlands to preserve biodiversity.
- Increasing presence of non-indigenous invasive species also in coastal/terrestrial areas (not only animals, but also plants and other species are threatening the endemic ecosystems).
- Insufficient capacity of protected areas to manage natural resources and to harmonise national and transnational policies on management and conservation of large carnivores.
- Insufficient Adriatic-Ionian region-wide scientific evidence and coordinated monitoring of transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity.

3.2.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** Under the ‘Enlargement’ horizontal topic in the Strategy action plan, an initiative focusing on collaborative conservation efforts with EU members country and Republic of San Marino and candidate countries is being proposed. This activity involves the development and implementation of joint projects aimed at protecting and managing transboundary terrestrial habitats and biodiversity. Such projects will focus on endangered species and critical ecosystems. Aligned with Chapter 27: Environment of the *EU acquis*, this activity emphasises nature protection and biodiversity conservation. The expected outcome is an enhanced conservation of biodiversity across national borders, focusing on shared terrestrial habitats.
- **Capacity building.** Under the ‘Capacity Building’ horizontal topic in the Strategy action plan, there is a key initiative to implement educational initiatives focused on terrestrial biodiversity conservation and habitat restoration. This activity encompasses training on effective biodiversity conservation strategies, habitat restoration techniques, sustainable land management, and species protection. Aligned with Chapter 27: Environment of the *EU acquis*, this activity specifically targets education and capacity building in biodiversity management.
- **Innovation and research.** Under the ‘Innovation and Research’ horizontal topic in the Strategy action plan, there is a significant focus on fostering innovative research projects dedicated to habitat conservation, species protection, and sustainable land use. This activity seeks to explore and develop new methods and strategies for terrestrial ecology and land management. Aligned with Chapter 27: Environment of the *EU acquis*, the activity emphasises innovative approaches to land and species conservation. The expected result is the development and implementation of novel conservation strategies.

This topic, as well as related actions are strictly connected with green transition challenges and needs as they face environment degradation and contribute to strengthen climate action.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** In the area of Circular Economy, particularly within the scope of Transnational Terrestrial Habitats and Biodiversity, a critical activity is the promotion of sustainable land use and waste reduction strategies. This initiative is closely aligned with the Environment chapter of the *acquis*, with a specific focus on waste management. The primary goal here is to achieve enhanced biodiversity conservation, coupled with a reduction in the ecological footprint across transnational terrestrial habitats.
- **Green rural development.** In the context of Green Rural Development concerning Transnational Terrestrial Habitats and Biodiversity, there is a significant emphasis on encouraging biodiversity-friendly agricultural practices in rural areas. This approach is in line with the Agriculture and Rural Development and Environment chapters of the *acquis*. The main objective of this activity is to enhance ecosystem services and conserve biodiversity within rural landscapes.

- **Digitalisation.** Under the theme of Digitalisation in Transnational Terrestrial Habitats and Biodiversity, a key activity is the development of digital tools for the monitoring of biodiversity and habitat health. This initiative is aligned with the Digital Agenda and Environment chapters of the *acquis*, highlighting the integration of technology with environmental management. The expected outcome of this activity is to enhance the monitoring capabilities and facilitate data-driven decision-making for the conservation of habitat and biodiversity.

3.2.3 Action – Joint population management for large carnivores

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Joint population management for large carnivores and awareness rising activities, protecting the habitats and working towards quality of life and coexistence¹⁸
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint mapping, monitoring and population management plans for large carnivores and non-indigenous invasive species. • Development of joint monitoring such as standardised methods and protocols. • Support for international networking and exchange of experience between key stakeholders and authorities. • Foster the coexistence of large carnivores and traditional agricultural activities, such as grazing. • Capacity-building on population management for large carnivores, incl. cross-sectoral cooperation (agriculture, spatial planning, hunting), stakeholder engagement and awareness raising for improvement of sectoral plans and practices and reduction of conflicts. • Support the rehabilitation of the key habitats of international importance and improve connections between protected areas. • Support to integration of the results and findings on population management for large carnivores in spatial planning and indicators measuring their implementation. • Support to accession countries in aligning with <i>EU Nature acquis</i>.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient integral natural reserves and connections between protected areas in coastal, transitional environment and wetlands to preserve biodiversity. • Insufficient capacities of protected areas for management of nature resources and to harmonise national and transnational policies on management and conservation of large carnivores. • Insufficient Adriatic-Ionian region-wide scientific evidence and coordinated

¹⁸ The initiative to set up a transnational platform for large carnivores in the area of the Dinaric-Balkan-Pindos was launched at the beginning of 2021. The aim of the platform is to set up a long-term mechanism for the exchange of experiences and data management of large carnivores (Slovenia to Greece for bears and to Bulgaria for wolves and lynxes). This approach reflects models established in other regions, such as the Alpine Convention or the Carpathian Convention, in which there is already established cooperation on the topic of tourism, agriculture, transboundary management of large animals, etc. In 2022, the continuation of activities is financed by the Federal Ministry for the Environment (BMU) which runs the Advisory Assistance Programme to support projects aiming for environmental protection in the countries covered by the programme. The target regions of the programme are the states of Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasian countries and Central Asia.

	monitoring of transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity.				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Human – large carnivore conflicts properly addressed and minimised in a timely manner (communities and institutional capacity building implemented, exchange and implementation of expertise, knowledge, best practices transfer is improved). 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	/				
Indicators How to measure the activities under this action?	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
	OI: Number of cross-border projects for large carnivore conservation	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG 3 questionnaire
	OI: Number of public awareness-raising events focused on large carnivores	RCO115 Interreg: Public events across borders jointly organised	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG 3 questionnaire
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the development of strategies and action plans	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations		TBD (2030)	TSG 3
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participation in joint actions across borders	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 (2023)	TBD (2030)	TSG3 questionnaire
	RI: Species show no deterioration in conservation trends and status				EU biodiversity Strategy dashboard

3.2.4 Action – Conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Conservation of migratory waterbirds and their habitats: Support for implementation and enforcement of Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian migratory waterbirds (“the Agreement”)
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify sites and habitats for migratory waterbirds occurring within their territory and encourage the protection, management, rehabilitation, and restoration of these sites. Capacity building on the Agreement, incl. cross-sectoral cooperation (agriculture, hunting, spatial planning), stakeholder engagement and awareness raising for improvement of sectoral plans and practices. Support to the harmonisation of the Agreement’s research and monitoring methods in the Adriatic-Ionian region. Awareness raising for the need to improve hunting legislation and its proper implementation. Support to accession countries in aligning with <i>EU Nature acquis</i>.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insufficient capacities of protected areas for management of nature resources and to harmonise national and transnational policies on management and conservation of waterbirds and their habitats. Insufficient Adriatic-Ionian region-wide scientific evidence and coordinated monitoring of transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity. High risks of wildfires and the effects of heat and water scarcity on agriculture, outdoor employment, and public health. Coastal areas are vulnerable to flooding, erosion, and saltwater intrusion. Migratory birds navigating across borders encounter numerous perils such as hazards, habitat degradation, pollution, and deadly power lines. Due to a small number of undisturbed wetlands on the eastern coast of the Adriatic and the lack of hunting ban areas and hunting rules that are not in line with EU legislation, the vulnerable, threatened, or endangered migratory bird species are being killed. Moreover, in some countries there is an insufficient law enforcement of the rules in place. A comprehensive tracking of the number of rehabilitated and restored sites, to provide a measurable way to evaluate the effectiveness of conservation efforts in the Adriatic-Ionian region.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rehabilitated and restored sites and habitats for migratory water birds occurring within the Adriatic-Ionian region. Harmonised of research and monitoring methods for the Agreement in the Adriatic-Ionian region and rehabilitation of key habitats of international importance. Rehabilitation of the key habitats of international importance. Improved management of nature resources in protected areas and harmonisation of national and transnational policies on management and conservation of large carnivores. Improved scientific evidence and coordinated monitoring of transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity in the Adriatic-Ionian region.

Strategy flagships and strategic projects	'PET HAB ECO – Protection and enhancement of natural terrestrial habitats and ecosystems'				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Number of surveys of migratory water bird populations	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG3 questionnaire
	OI: Number of events for improvement of sectoral plans and practices and to improve hunting legislation	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG3 questionnaire
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participation in joint actions across borders	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 (2023)	tbd (2030)	TSG3
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participations in joint training schemes	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	tbd (2030)	TSG3
	RI: Species show no deterioration in conservation trends and status				EU biodiversity Strategy dashboard
	RI: No. of rehabilitated and restored sites of migratory water birds and their habitats	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG3 questionnaires

3.2.5 Action– Improve interaction between anthropic and natural ecosystems and habitats

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Improve interaction between anthropic and natural ecosystems and habitats
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness rising activities on implementation and financial aspects of environmentally friendly farming practices, with focus on the interaction between anthropic and natural ecosystems and habitats. • Joint analysis on climate-related risks and mitigation and adaptation measures (e.g. forest fires prevention, native forest restoration, campaigns to regenerate the tree cover, nurturing patches of forest and woodland in agricultural/urban landscapes). • Support the development of ecosystem services.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of capacities of protected areas for management of nature resources and to harmonise national and transnational policies on management and conservation of large carnivores. • Absence of Adriatic-Ionian region-wide scientific evidence and coordinated monitoring of transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity. Western Balkan is one of the regions in Europe that is most heavily affected by the impact of climate change due to considerable increases in temperature. Consequently, it is necessary to introduce new best practice measures on prevention of forest fires and forest restoration. • Implementing new best practices for fire prevention will help the countries to adapt to changing climate conditions and mitigate the impacts of wildfires on forests and its unique ecosystems.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in adoption of environmentally friendly farming practices through awareness-raising activities and financial support. • Improved analysis and implementation of climate-related risk mitigation and adaptation measures, such as prevention of forest fires and native forest restoration. • Improved management of nature resources in protected areas and harmonisation of national and transnational policies on management and conservation of large carnivores. • Improved scientific evidence and coordinated monitoring of transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity in the Adriatic-Ionian region. • Raised awareness on financial aspects of environmentally friendly farming practices, with focus on the interaction between anthropic and natural ecosystems and habitats. • Joint analysis on climate-related risks and possible mitigation and adaptation measures (e.g. forest fires prevention, native forest restoration, campaigns to regenerate the tree cover, nurturing patches of forest and woodland in agricultural/urban landscapes). • Promote the enhancement of ecosystem services.
Strategy flagships and	Under flagship PROTECTION AND ENHANCEMENT OF NATURAL TERRESTRIAL HABITATS AND ECOSYSTEMS - PET HAB ECO the following strategic projects were

strategic projects	developed: Monopillar strategic projects <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FOREST READAPT - Renewal of the adaptation of coppice forests in a drastically changing environment. SEC-DIV-CONIFERS - Secure diversity through a holistic approach for the most threatened Mediterranean conifer ecosystems: combining genetic, physiology, biodiversity indices, germination and restoration. Bio-Shelters - Botanical Gardens as Biodiversity Shelters and Nurseries 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Number of projects concepts addressing anthropic-natural habitat interaction	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG3 questionnaires
	OI: Number of events and activities on the importance of ecological connectivity and its ecosystem services	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG3 questionnaires
	RI: Introduction of new best practice measures on prevention of forest fires and forest restoration	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions RCR104 Interreg: Solutions taken up or up-scaled by organisations	0 (2023)	TBD	TSG3 questionnaires
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the development of joint solutions	RCO 116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions	0 (2023)	TBD (2030)	TSG 3
	OI: Number of activities supporting the implementation of global and EU targets for biodiversity through the participations in joint training schemes	RCO 85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 (2023)	TBD (2030)	TSG 3
	RI: Significant areas of degraded and carbon-rich ecosystems are				EU biodiversity Strategy dashboard –

	restored. Habitats show no deterioration in conservation trends and status.				Target 4 partially modified to fit action 3.2.3
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4. Pillar 4 – Sustainable Tourism

The Adriatic-Ionian region is rich in natural and cultural heritage. It comprises a number of Natura 2000 protected sites and 72 cultural and natural properties belonging to UNESCO World Heritage List, plus 44 elements inscribed in the UNESCO list of Intangible Heritage Humanity. The heritage sites, but also unexploited natural wealth, are a significant attracting factor. Recognising the tremendous value that cultural and natural heritage brings to society it makes a lot of sense for these natural allies to join forces in order to help protect the EU's exceptionally valuable yet fragile heritage for future generations⁴. The ecosystem services delivered by Natura 2000, the European ecological network of protected areas and a pillar of the EU's biodiversity strategy, have a great deal of potential to highlight and enhance the strong links between cultural and natural heritage.

Indeed, incoming tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian region is growing steadily, despite the rebound during the COVID-19 crisis. At the same time, new challenges such as climate change and natural disasters, e.g. floods, droughts and heat waves, pose severe threats for the future.

The economy of the region is heavily depending on tourism – in most cases mass tourism. The issue of high seasonality in tourism industry (often overlapping with period of major water stress) affects employment, environment and availability of local services. In the most attractive places, it has already created a situation of over-tourism at the expense of natural resources, cultural heritage and welfare of local communities. At the same time, tourism offers an important development potential. Innovation in tourism can help manage visitor flows and reduce the negative impacts on nature and resources. Rural and cultural tourism provides development and employment opportunities to inland marginal areas, isolated from the main areas of development.

There are notable differences in tourism infrastructure in the region, with most of the EU candidate countries lagging behind in terms of marketing, promotion, quality standards of accommodation. Although the digitalisation of the tourism industry offers new possibilities and increases the outreach for new products (sites, experiences etc.) there is a low level of investment. However, new emerging patterns in the tourism industry – in terms of customer approach, new products and experiences, and supply side – demand quick innovative reactions.

In order to create a common understanding of sustainable and innovative destination management, all countries can learn from the more experienced destinations in the region. Macro-regional routes and cross-border networks can help to develop the Adriatic-Ionian region as one integrated tourism area. This pillar focuses on promoting sustainable tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian region, taking into consideration all the key dimensions of economic, environmental, cultural and social sustainability. The work of the pillar will contribute to promotion of innovative ways for tourism and to building resilience against global crises such as wars, climate change and loss of biodiversity. The actions of Pillar 4 will be in accordance with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its commitment to support tourism that creates sustainable jobs and promotes local culture, products and services.

The Strategy work in the field of tourism builds on the European Agenda for Tourism 2030 and will contribute to the co-implementation process of the Transition Pathway for Tourism between the European Commission, member states and tourism stakeholders.

It has the vision to promote innovative, resilient, sustainable and universally accessible tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian region. The activities aim at helping to support the digital and green transition of the tourism ecosystem considering relevant sectors and different public and private stakeholders. They will contribute to create favourable framework conditions supporting the sustainable management of destinations and to develop new capacities and skills to strengthen resilience and prepare the sector for the future. This includes also ensuring the carrying capacities in relation to nature and environment are not exceeded and the tourism pressure on the environment, in particular Marine Protected Areas, is reduced.

The Strategy promotes the ecotourism, fishing tourism, agritourism and rural tourism and the Mediterranean Diet and local organic and origin production as drivers of sustainable tourism and socio-economic development within the Adriatic-Ionian region.

4.1 Topic – Facilitating digital and green transition of the tourism and cultural heritage offer

Global objectives. The tourism ecosystem was among the most severely affected ecosystems by COVID-19. Resilient public policies and favourable framework conditions at national and regional level aim at helping the tourism sector to recover and to develop a sustainable and resilient tourism offer. The green and digital transition has to be promoted and implemented by all tourism stakeholders to make the tourism and cultural heritage sector sustainable and resilient. Sustainable tourism development makes optimal use of cultural and environmental resources, helping to conserve nature and biodiversity. It also respects the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values.

Strategy objectives. The objective of this topic is to develop favourable framework conditions and facilitate digital and green transition with the aim to diversify and strengthen the tourism offer in the Adriatic-Ionian region. This covers the promotion of collaborative governance of tourism destinations, improved exchanges and knowledge on statistics and indicators for tourism, and the promotion of digital and green objectives in tourism strategies. Particular efforts are needed to capitalise on existing networks, platforms and also on results from EU-funded projects, especially ADRION. In the long-run, the Adriatic-Ionian region could become a global leader in sustainable tourism, considering it is already one of the most extensively developed touristic macroregions in the world.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, challenges and opportunities below, the activities under this topic aim at:

- setting up macro-regional networks and routes, to promote collaboration of tourism destinations and with other innovative stakeholders at local, regional and national level, and lead to tourism services and products based on cross-border collaboration;
- supporting countries in progressing towards improved tourism data systems, that are in line with European data systems and include sustainability indicators;
- helping tourism stakeholders to develop new capacities to integrate green and digital transition in tourism strategies.

4.1.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces several specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Rich history and very diverse cultural heritage Rich customs tradition and intangible cultural assets (including traditional food and beverages, crafts etc.).
- Rich natural heritage, biodiversity and many protected areas.
- Innovative way to deal with high-volume visitor inflows in most popular areas.
- Large areas whose potential for tourism is not yet developed.
- Existing collaboration through tourism clusters and networks.
- Existing tourism strategies in most countries at national level to support the digital and green transition.
- Support digital and green transition in tourism through available EU and national funds.
- Strong presence of CCI in the Area, also working in close cooperation with the tourism sector.

Challenges:

- Intense seasonality of tourism.
- Concentration on 'sun and sea tourism' products and services based on mass tourism.
- Unbalanced territorial distribution of tourism offer in most countries (focus on urban and coastal areas).
- Poor implementation of sustainable tourism policies and responsible tourism concepts.
- Insufficient data on smart and sustainable tourism.
- Insufficient experience with sustainable tourism destination management.
- New models and tools for stakeholder involvement (local population, communities, visitors).
- Complex and not harmonised regulatory frameworks.
- Lack of knowledge on innovation and digitalisation practices in tourism.
- Lack of infrastructure to support digital and green transition of tourism.
- Use of cultural heritage while ensuring its transmission to future generations
- Lack of managerial capabilities within CCIs.

4.1.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** Activities help candidate countries to better integrate with EU member states in field of sustainable tourism policies and related regulatory frameworks and activities in the fields of data management and smart specialisation. Knowledge transfer will take place during the TSG4 meetings and other Strategy thematic events dedicated to tourism and culture by promoting best practices and presenting experiences. Strategy activities and

projects should also address the enlargement chapters: 1-9 related to the single market, 28 to consumer and health protection, 27 to environment and climate change, 15 to renewable energy, 21 to Trans-European networks, 10 to Information society and media, 11 to Agriculture and rural development, 12 to food safety, 18 to Statistics.

- **Capacity building.** The envisaged activities comprise, among others, capacity building on data collection practices on tourism statistics and various efforts to strengthen the sharing of knowledge and experiences of data using for policy planning e.g. concerning collaborative sustainable destination management models, innovation of tourism products and services and the cooperation between private, public and non-profit stakeholders.
- **Innovation and research.** The digital and green transitions of the tourism and cultural heritage offer has a strong focus on innovation and great potential in the region. It is also acknowledged as one of the key drivers of tourism transformation in the region within respective S3s. Among others, it includes activities on sustainable innovation in tourism destinations and promotes collaboration between tourism stakeholders dealing with innovation and research. It also includes monitoring tourist trends in the region. In order to ease the pressure of touristic flows during the pick season (classical mass tourism), the Adriatic and Ionian region should start monitoring touristic trends in the region and strive towards a balanced tourism development. In line with the Sustainable development goals the UNWTO international network of sustainable tourism observatories is trending and, in this respect, also a macro-regional observatory or information centre could be developed in order to measure the impact of tourism on the cities/countries/region, in close cooperation with CCIs.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** Sustainable tourism is an important element of the transition to a circular economy. Activities will contribute to raising awareness of the importance of the circular economy in tourism as a key element of sustainable development that minimises its environmental impacts, including waste and pollution as well as CO₂ emissions. Connecting business models/initiatives (such as Climate-KIC) to support value chain development and implementation of circular economy in participating countries.
- **Green rural development.** Activities under this topic will also address sustainable tourism in rural areas and thus contribute to green rural development. The promotion of the green and balanced tourism development will also include rural areas where is especially important to take care of the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. Supporting smart community/village concept by increased digitalisation and public services uptake to support tourism development in rural areas.
- **Digitalisation.** Digital transition of the tourism sector is addressed through activities promoting green and digital transition in tourism strategies. Activities under this topic will contribute to the innovations that ensure the continued competitiveness, growth and sustainable development of the sector.

4.1.3 Action – Collaborative governance and sustainable innovation in tourism destinations

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Collaborative governance and sustainable innovation in tourism destinations
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing knowledge and experiences on collaborative destination management models, importance of circular economy and nature conservation in tourism and the cooperation between private, public and non-profit stakeholders. • Study and share best practice on sustainable destination governance, innovation and management, e.g. related to cruising tourism and nautical tourism, including with regards to navigational limitations for nature protection and pollution prevention and remediation. • Developing a strategy or masterplan on green and balanced tourism development. Most of the tourist visits are still oriented towards cities or centres, based around the coast of the Adriatic and Ionian region. In order to re-direct tourist flows towards the hinterland of the region and rural areas, a strategy or masterplan should be developed, specifying how to attract and engage local population towards the development and investment into tourist offer. The Strategy also should take into account the social and labour dimension, such as permanent (not seasonal) workforce, tourist labour migration issues etc. • Promote the collaboration between destinations and tourism clusters to promote knowledge exchange on sustainable and smart innovation in tourism and collaborative destination management, with a specific focus on the exchange and transfer between EU and candidate countries. • Promote the collaboration between tourism stakeholders with actors dealing with innovation and research, nature, culture and creativity, e.g. in the context of smart specialisation strategies. • Development of 'niche' tourism in connection to sustainable outdoor activities could encourage the extension of the tourist season from 'summer' season to the whole year season. That could be supported by different gastronomic offers and cultural activities and the inclusion of local population. This shift would also reduce the Strategy's region form dependency on unbalanced tourism and contribute to the Sustainable development of the region. • Protect and promote Europe's cultural and natural heritage as a shared resource in the green transition aiming at nature and culture-based solutions.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intense seasonality of tourism. • Excessive focus on 'sun and sea tourism' products and services based on mass tourism. • Unbalanced territorial distribution of tourism offer in most countries (focus on urban and coastal areas). • Insufficient experience with sustainable tourism destination management. • Insufficient knowledge on innovation and digitalisation practices in

	<p>tourism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient infrastructure to support the digital and green transition in tourism. • Integration of cultural heritage in digital and green transition. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Macro-regional networks and routes developed. • Knowledge exchange on sustainable innovation in tourism and collaborative governance between EU and candidate countries. • Increased collaboration between tourism destinations at all levels. • Sustainable innovation in tourism is facilitated through the cooperation between tourism ecosystems and other innovative players at local, regional and national level. • Cultural and natural heritage as a transformative force for community regeneration being enhanced. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under flagship EXPANDING THE TOURIST SEASON TO ALL-YEAR ROUND the following strategic project was developed:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CruiseAir - Destination Management Plans preparation for Cruise destinations within the Adriatic-Ionian region <p>Cross-pillar strategic project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADRIONCYCLETOUR - ADRIatic IONian CYCLE route for sustainable TOURism (Pillars 4 and 2) <p>Under the flagship 'Development of Sustainable and Thematic Cultural Routes/Connecting Cultural Routes in EUSAIR', the following strategic project was developed:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AIR Cultural Routes - Adriatic-Ionian region Cultural Routes Tourism Governance Model: An Opportunity for the EUSAIR Area 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: No. of activities promoting collaborative destination management and cooperation of tourism stakeholders with other sectors	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	OI: No. of activities promoting	RCO81 Interreg:	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4

	cooperation of tourism actors with other sectors/actors (innovation, creative sectors etc.)	Participation in joint actions across borders			
	OI: No. of activities to promote and raise awareness on the role of cultural heritage in the green transition	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	RI: Increase in the number of destinations that apply collaborative destination management	RCR104 Interreg: Solutions taken up or up-scaled	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	RI: Destinations develop innovative tourism offer? based on cultural heritage	RCR104 Interreg: Solutions taken up or up-scaled	0 p.a. (2023)	3 p.a. (2030)	TSG4

4.1.4 Action – Promoting the use of smart and sustainable indicators for tourism

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Promoting the use of smart and sustainable indicators for tourism
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing and transfer knowledge to candidate countries on requirements, implementation needs and opportunities of European tourism data systems, such as the European Tourism Dashboard, DATES Project or the European Data Space for Tourism. • Exchanging experiences and best practices on smart tourism data and indicator systems at national and regional level. • Organise workshops and capacity building on data collection rules on tourism statistics and ways to include elements on economic, social and environmental sustainability. • Analysing and preparing the use of sustainability indicators at destination level that will contribute to the innovations and facilitate research.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of data on smart and sustainable tourism. • Complex and not harmonised regulatory frameworks.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participating countries are making progress towards improved tourism data systems, which include sustainability indicators and are in line with the European tourism data systems. • Improved collaboration between stakeholder in field of data collecting, sharing and harmonising
Strategy flagships	Under flagship 'RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT FOR IMPROVEMENT OF SME'S

and strategic projects	<p>PERFORMANCE AND GROWTH- DIVERSIFICATION' the following strategic project was developed:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CulTourAIR - Survey on cultural tourism demand in the Adriatic-Ionian Region 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: No. of activities on EU tourism data systems	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	OI: No. of activities promoting integration of sustainability in tourism statistics	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	OI: Increased number of stakeholders that use tourism data sources	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	RI: Number of destinations measuring and collecting statistics that include elements on economic, social and environmental Sustainability	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4

4.1.5 Action – Promoting the green and digital transition in tourism strategies

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Promoting the green and digital transition in tourism strategies
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness raising and supporting the green and digital transition in all MS. • Stimulating exchanges of experiences and ideas regarding national or regional strategies taking account of the green and digital transition of tourism. • Disseminating best practices for digital, green transition as well as participatory and inclusive Strategy development. • Developing of innovative and digital solutions. The digital solutions in tourism and culture sector should be addressed (i.e. in relation to tourist offer, management of tourism flows, promotion, reservation system) that can contribute to a balanced development of the Adriatic and Ionian region. • Promoting the development of cross-border, transnational or macro-regional strategies for sustainable tourism and green and digital transition in tourism through organisation of capacity-building training.

Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on 'sun and sea tourism' products and services based on mass tourism, lacking niche, quality-based products and services. Unbalanced territorial distribution of tourism offer in most countries (focus on urban and coastal areas). Poor implementation of sustainable tourism policies and responsible tourism concepts, accessible tourism including Lack of models and tools for stakeholder involvement (local population, communities, visitors). 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective cooperation and an exchange of experiences on the green and digital transition in tourism strategies have been established in the AI region. Best practices on the support/promotion of green and digital transition in local, regional and national tourism strategies have been identified and disseminated. Exchange of experiences and ideas to develop cross-border, transnational or macro-regional strategies for sustainable tourism and green and digital transition in tourism. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under flagships 'Development of the Network of Sustainable Tourism Businesses and Clusters' and 'Green Mapping for The AI region - Supporting Development and Market Access for Responsible and Sustainable Tourism Destinations (Management) and Micro/SME Operations in the EUSAIR region', the following strategic projects were developed:</p> <p>Cross-pillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> BLUECULTURE – Development of Macro-Regional Cluster on Blue Culture Technologies and creation of International Competence Centre (Pillars 4 and 1) STETAI - Sustainable Tourism through Environmental Energy Technologies in Buildings of High Architectural Interest (Pillars 4 and 2) 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: No. of activities/projects promoting the green and digital transition in tourism strategies	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	OI: No. of activities to promote participatory and inclusive Strategy development in tourism	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4

	RI: Increased number of data-driven destination management tools and green certification schemes	RCO116 Interreg: Jointly developed solutions RCR104 Interreg: Solutions taken up or up-scaled by organisations	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	RI: Participating countries or their key tourism regions to have comprehensive tourism strategies	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4

4.2 Topic – Preparing for the future: knowledge, skills and management

Global objectives. Tourism is a unique economic sector that builds on effective management of destinations and on quality services and products for visitors and travellers. The green and digital transition offer new opportunities for tourism companies and destination management organisations to become more sustainable, innovative and shock resilient. However, the knowledge on sustainable practices and digital tourism is not yet present in all destination management organisations and companies. Especially SMEs, which most often face structural challenges and lack the necessary knowledge, skills and funds to introduce new sustainable, circular, energy-efficient or digital solutions into their businesses. SMEs also have problems learning about new relevant skills and capacities or to identify and access relevant training and education opportunities.

Strategy objectives. This topic addresses knowledge gaps on sustainable destination management and green and digital skills in tourism in the Adriatic-Ionian region. The objective is to raise awareness on the opportunities of the twin transition and to develop, support and promote effective dissemination, sharing and learning on green and digital skills among all tourism stakeholders, especially destination management organisations, tourism business associations/cluster and SMEs.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, challenges and opportunities below, the activities under this topic aim at:

- increasing the level of knowledge and capacities about sustainable and smart destination management among tourism SMEs and tourism stakeholders;
- a wide adaptation of education models and skills in tourism to the new tourism trends and tourists needs including people with access needs, in particular to the digital and green transition, e.g. through corresponding courses at universities/training centres and the development/updating of national guidelines on training/education in the tourism sector.

4.2.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities that the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Rich history and very diverse cultural heritage.
- Rich customs tradition and intangible cultural assets (including traditional food and beverages, crafts etc.).
- Rich natural heritage, biodiversity and many protected areas.
- Innovative ways to deal with high-volume visitor inflows in most popular areas.
- Large areas whose potential for tourism is not yet developed.
- Existing collaboration through tourism clusters and networks.
- Existing tourism strategies in most countries at national level to support the digital and green transition.
- Support available via EU and national funds to support the digital and green transition in tourism.
- Strong presence of CCIs in the Area, also working in close cooperation with the tourism sector.

Challenges:

- Lack of experience and knowledge on sustainable tourism destination management.
- Lack of experience and knowledge on sustainability, energy efficiency, and circular approaches in tourism SMEs.
- Lack of knowledge on available funding opportunities for tourism actors.
- Lack of experience and knowledge on digital practices in tourism at the level of SMES and destinations.
- Lack of awareness in SMEs on the need to develop new capacities and skills on digital and green tourism solutions.
- Lack of awareness in destination management organisations and tourism authorities on the tourism pathways and the twin transitions.
- Lack of visibility and knowledge on training and capacity-building opportunities on green and digital tourism.
- Need to integrate green and digital skills into the tourism education and training.
- Lack of managerial capabilities within CCIs.

4.2.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The activities help the candidate countries to better integrate with EU member states in field of sustainable tourism policies and related regulatory frameworks and activities related to knowledge management and skills in the field. The knowledge, best

practices and experiences will be shared at the TSG4 meetings and other Strategy thematic events. The Strategy's activities and projects should also address the enlargement chapters: 19 related to Social Policy and employment, 20 to enterprise and industrial policy, 25 to science and research, 26 to education and culture, 22 to regional policy and structural instruments, 23 to fundamental rights.

- **Capacity building.** The envisaged activities comprise among others capacity building with a strong focus on knowledge and skills needed for the future of the tourism sector, including e.g. reskilling, upskilling and renewing tourism education with new skills profiles in vocational education and training policy and curricula. The activities facilitate also learning in tourism SMEs through providing user-friendly access points for tourism SMEs on self-learning resources and through providing online spaces where tourism SMEs can connect with each other to share learning. Only proper addressing of this issue can give proper answers to the challenges of the modern society (transition to sustainable economy and society, depopulation of ageing society, brain drain, economic migration, digitalisation, green and blue transformation, inclusion of youth).
- **Innovation and research.** The digital and green transition of the tourism industry and related skills development has a strong focus on innovation in the field. The activities focus on putting new solutions into practice, also in close cooperation with CCIs, and enable tourism players to learn about them. Activities will contribute to the development of data-driven destination management models and mechanisms as well as to innovative tourism services using advanced technologies and digitised cultural heritage.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** Sustainable tourism is an important element of the transition to a circular economy. The envisaged activities include, among others, sharing of knowledge on best practices and experiences with green transition of tourism stakeholders and SMEs, including new skills necessary for circular economy approaches in tourism.
- **Green rural development.** Activities under this topic will also address sustainable tourism in rural areas and thus contribute to green rural development, such as are: sustainable and smart tourism management in rural destinations, promotion of knowledge and skills necessary for stakeholders in rural tourism areas.

Digitalisation. The digital transition of the tourism sector is addressed through activities promoting digitalisation in tourism, and the need to strengthen digital skills of players in the tourism sector. Activities will help to raise awareness on the need to develop digital skills as well as promote the future digital skills needed by tourism, cultural and creative sectors.

4.2.3 Action – Sustainable and smart tourism management and services

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Promotion of sustainable and smart tourism management and services
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting the exchange of information on best practice, peer learning and networking on sustainable, accessible and smart tourism management practices and approaches. • Awareness-raising activities for tourism actors on the benefits of digitalisation and on existing digitalisation programmes.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting the exchange of ideas and experiences on digitalisation in tourism. Sharing knowledge on best practices and experiences with green transition of tourism stakeholders and SMEs, in particular CCI, including circular economy approaches in tourism.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of experience and knowledge on sustainable tourism destination management. Lack of experience and knowledge on sustainability, energy efficiency, and circular approaches in tourism SMEs. Lack of knowledge on available funding opportunities for tourism stakeholders. Lack of experience and knowledge on digital practices in tourism at the level of SMES and destinations.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established an effective cooperation and exchange of experiences on the promotion of sustainability, energy efficiency, circular economy and nature conservation in tourism. Increased knowledge and capacities among tourism stakeholders about sustainable and smart destination management. Available information for SMEs and destination management organisations to learn from best practices and support ideas on the benefits and implementation of digital and green tourism practices.
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under flagship DEVELOPMENT OF THE NETWORK OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM BUSINESSES AND CLUSTERS GREEN MAPPING FOR THE AI REGION - SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT AND MARKET ACCESS FOR RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DESTINATIONS (MANAGEMENT) AND MICRO/SME OPERATIONS IN THE EUSAIR REGION the following strategic projects were developed:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ProDestAIR - Adriatic-Ionian strategy and Solutions for Smart Integrated Destination Management based on Multiple Intelligence Systems LIVING THE SEA 4.0 - Digitalisation of cultural heritage of fishing traditions and fish industry for creation of virtual touristic points of interest in the region TG AIR - Green Mapping for the Adriatic-Ionian region - Supporting Development and Market Access for Responsible and Sustainable Tourism Destinations and Micro/SME Operations in the region <p>Under flagship TRAINING AND SKILLS IN THE FIELD OF TOURISM BUSINESSES (VOCATIONAL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS) the following strategic project was developed</p> <p>Cross-pillar strategic project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ADRIONet - Managing Tourism Flows in Protected Areas (Pillars 4 and 3)

Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: No. of activities to promote sustainable, accessible and smart tourism practices and management	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	OI: No. of activities on the digital transition of tourism	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	OI: No. of activities on the green transition of tourism	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	RI: Increased number of destinations that offer accessible and smart tourism services	RCR12 Digital: Users of new and upgraded digital services, products and processes developed by enterprises	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	RI: Increased number of destinations using advanced technologies and digitised cultural heritage	RCO77 Number of cultural and tourism sites supported RCR77 Visitors	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4

		of cultural and tourism sites supported			
	RI: Increased number of green tourism destinations	RCO77 Number of cultural and tourism sites supported RCR77 Visitors of cultural and tourism sites supported	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4

4.2.4 Action – Knowledge and skills for the future

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Knowledge and skills for the future
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness-raising activities on the need to develop digital and green skills within the Tourism Transition Pathway to destination authorities, destination management organisations, tourism business associations, clusters and SMEs, in particular CCIs. Developing opportunities to distribute information on key support resources and funding opportunities for skill development and innovation in tourism SMEs on European, national and regional level. Developing and renewing tourism education: promoting the incorporation of new skills profiles in vocational education and training policy and curricula. Facilitating learning through providing user-friendly access points for tourism SMEs on self-learning resources and through providing online spaces where tourism SMEs can connect with each other to share learning. Promote the skills needed by cultural and creative sectors, including digital, entrepreneurial, traditional and specialised skills.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of awareness in SMEs on the need to develop new capacities and skills on digital and green tourism solutions. Lack of knowledge on available funding opportunities for tourism actors. Lack of visibility and knowledge on training and capacity-building opportunities on green and digital tourism. Need to integrate green and digital skills into the training and education curricula on tourism as well as to informal learning.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raised awareness on the skills needed for the digital and green transition in tourism. Education models and curriculum in tourism adapted to new tourism trends and tourists needs, in particular to the digital and green transition. Tourism SMEs, students and workers, as well as tourism organisations, clusters, universities and schools can find/feed information on education

	and skills in tourism in knowledge portals and e-learning platforms.				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<p>Under the flagship TRAINING AND SKILLS IN THE FIELD OF TOURISM BUSINESSES (VOCATIONAL AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS) the following strategic project was developed:</p> <p>Monopillar strategic projects</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DES_AIR - Education for Integrated Sustainable Tourism Destination Management 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: No. of activities to promote new skills and adapted curricula in tourism	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes RCR81 Interreg: Completion of joint training schemes	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG
	OI: No. of best practices shared on digital and green skills in tourism	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes RCR81 Interreg: Completion of joint training schemes	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	OI: Information on skills needs and training opportunities for twin transition in tourism disseminated	n/a	0 p.a. (2023)	5 p.a. (2030)	TSG4
	RI: New curricula in tourism developed and implemented	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes RCR81 Interreg: Completion of	0 p.a. (2023)	2 p.a. (2030)	TSG4

		joint training schemes			
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4.3 Topic - Greening of Tourism products and services

Global Objectives The concept of ‘green products and services’ usually revolves around three main pillars: environmental conservation, socio-cultural respect, and economic viability. These pillars guide travellers, tour operators, destination and accommodation managers in adopting sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and the communities they visit. In the context of the European Union (EU), the green transition of tourism products and services is a crucial goal. The primary goal is therefore to foster eco-friendly and nature based tourism initiatives that showcase the region’s natural and cultural and natural beauty while minimising environmental impacts. This includes expanding sustainable tourism products and services such as nature trails, wildlife observation, and eco-lodges that adhere strictly to sustainability principles. Alongside promoting these ecotourism offerings, there’s an emphasis on implementing sustainable resource management practices. This effort focuses on the conservation of water, energy, biodiversity and land, encouraging the adoption of green technologies across the tourism sector. Additionally, enhancing local community engagement and development is crucial. The Strategy supports initiatives that empower local populations through job creation, skills training, and promotion of local crafts and products, aiming to foster inclusive economic growth and the transition to a green and circular economy within the tourism industry.

Strategy objectives. The objective for greening tourism products and services is to integrate environmental sustainability throughout all tourism operations and development processes in the Adriatic-Ionian region. This approach involves supporting the preservation of the region’s natural and cultural landscapes while promoting sustainable practices across member states. To achieve this, a collaborative framework that includes government bodies, private sector entities, NGOs, and local communities is essential. This collaboration will help: (i) develop sustainable infrastructure; (ii) implement environmental education programmes; (iii) promote reliable ecolabels (such as the use of the Natura 2000 logo on goods and services and the EU Ecolabel); (iv) promote environmental management schemes such as EMAS; and (v) draw up unified sustainability standards. Moreover, building resilience and adaptability to environmental challenges is a key focus. The region aims to develop tourism strategies that enhance the sector’s ability to cope with climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, ensuring that tourism growth contributes positively to environmental and cultural resilience.

Specific objectives of the topic

The activities under this topic aim at the following.

- Promoting Ecotourism, Agritourism and Fishing Tourism.
- Promoting Rural Tourism.
- Promoting the Mediterranean Diet and local Origin Products.
- Supporting cultural preservation and enhancement, recognising and capitalising on the Mediterranean diet and local, organic and origin products as essential components of the region’s cultural heritage and identity. This recognition serves not only as a celebration of the

region's rich historical fabric but also as a crucial element in attracting culturally-minded tourists.

- Fostering sustainable economic growth, the initiative aims to stimulate economic development and diversification in rural areas. This is achieved by promoting products of origin and organic production, which are intrinsically linked to sustainable tourism practices. These efforts are designed to enhance the economic viability of rural communities and reduce the economic disparities between rural and urban areas.
- Fostering practices that enhance soil health, biodiversity, and ecosystem services, ensuring that tourism and agricultural activities contribute positively to the environmental health of the region. In terms of environmental sustainability, the focus must be on supporting the sustainable management of natural and agricultural resources.

4.3.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Improve knowledge and skills of actors on the operationalisation of multifunctional linkages between tourism and agri-food.
- Harmonise the legal and policy framework in participating countries for the implementation of fishing tourism activities (e.g. pesca-tourism, itti-tourism) and agritourism.
- Create institutional collaboration frameworks and platforms between tourism and agri-food actors.
- To systematically integrate the 'Bio-district' concept and experiences into the region-wide tourist offers as well as in tourist and rural development strategies and policies.
- Develop the interaction of small and medium-sized enterprises in agri-food and tourism.

Challenges:

- Review the complex and not always harmonised regulatory frameworks in the interaction between the tourism sector and agri-food one;
- Balance territorial distribution of tourism and agri-food activities in most countries;
- Avoid the abandonment of rural areas and migration especially of the youth;
- Mitigate the high footprints of tourism activities causing high environmental footprints;
- Limit the mass 'sun-and-beach' tourism, especially during summer putting pressure on natural and cultural resources, thus reducing high pressure on the nature and environment in coastal tourist areas;
- To mitigate the migration of skilled individuals from rural and coastal regions to urban areas.

4.3.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The activities help the candidate countries to better integrate with EU Member States in field of sustainable tourism policies and related regulatory frameworks and activities related to knowledge management and skills in the field. The knowledge, best practices and experiences will be shared at the TSG4 meetings and other Strategy thematic events. The Strategy's activities and projects should also address the enlargement chapters: 19 related to Social Policy and employment, 20 to enterprise and industrial policy, 25 to science and research, 26 to education and culture, 22 to regional policy and structural instruments, 23 to fundamental rights.
- **Capacity building.** The envisaged activities comprise among others capacity building with a strong focus on knowledge and skills needed for the future of the tourism sector, including e.g. reskilling, upskilling and renewing tourism education with new skills profiles in vocational education and raining policy and curricula. The activities facilitate also learning in tourism SMEs through providing user-friendly access points for tourism SMEs on self-learning resources and through providing online spaces where tourism SMEs can connect with each other to share learning.
- **Innovation and research.** The digital and green transition of the tourism industry and related skills development has a strong focus on innovation in the field. The activities focus on putting new solutions into practice, also in close cooperation with CCIs, and enable tourism players to learn about them. Activities will contribute to the development of data-driven destination management models and mechanisms as well as to innovative tourism services using advanced technologies and digitised cultural heritage.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** Sustainable tourism is an important element of the transition to a circular economy. The envisaged activities include, among others, sharing of knowledge on best practices and experiences with green transition of tourism stakeholders and SMEs, including new skills necessary for circular economy approaches in tourism and knowledge of reliable ecolabels and environmental management schemes such as EMAS.
- **Digitalisation.** The digital transition of the tourism sector is addressed through activities promoting digitalisation in tourism, and the need to strengthen digital skills of players in the tourism sector. Activities will help to raise awareness on the need to develop digital skills as well as promote the future digital skills needed by tourism, cultural and creative sectors.
- **Green rural development.** As part of green rural development, an essential activity focuses on supporting sustainable agricultural practices and organic farming in rural areas. This activity is closely linked with the chapters of the *acquis* concerning Rural Development It can significantly contribute to the sustainable tourism development in all region and better connectivity with local society - It can significantly contribute to the sustainable tourism development in all regions and better connectivity with local society in line with the 'farm to fork' strategy. The expected outcomes of this initiative are multifaceted, including a significant reduction in agricultural runoff, enhancement of water and local food products quality, and consequent improvement in the health of marine, rivers, lakes and rural ecosystems and rural tourism offer. The activity will also concentrate on the socio-economic dimensions of agricultural production, including job creation, fostering entrepreneurial

opportunities, and revitalising rural areas to enhance demographics in these regions. The realisation of these goals requires the active participation and collaboration of various stakeholders, such as cooperatives, tourism management authorities, cultural and environmental NGOs.

4.3.3 Action – Promoting agritourism, ecotourism and fishing tourism

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Promoting Agritourism, Ecotourism and fishing tourism
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmonise policy framework for the rural and coastal tourism practices within participating countries. • Promote income generating activities diversification within the rural tourism sector, encouraging agritourism, ecotourism or fishing tourism practices in participating countries. • Develop professional training to provide operators and actors with sustainable tourism management skills. • Set up and strengthen regional network for common vision and perspective and exchange. • Promote the investment in new technologies and modern tourism infrastructure to enhance visitor experience aiming at the revitalisation of rural and coastal destinations. • Promote reduction of waste generation and circular economy solutions. • Increase awareness and improve uptake of reliable ecolabels such as the use of the Natura 2000 logo on goods and products, the EU Ecolabel for tourist accommodations and of reliable environmental management schemes such as EMAS. • Promote nature and biodiversity conservation.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance local and traditional know-how as part of local heritage of the territorial and regional identity. • Boosting environmental protection through responsible tourism practices. • Safeguard of the historical background and a remarkably varied cultural heritage. Deep-rooted traditions and intangible cultural treasures, encompassing traditional cuisine, beverages, crafts, and more traditional local cultural heritage, ensuring its preservation for future generations. • Lack of harmonised legal and policy framework in participating countries for the implementation of fishing tourism activities (e.g. pesca-tourism, itti-tourism) and agritourism. • Migration of skilled individuals from rural and coastal regions to urban areas. • Lack of experience and knowledge on innovation, sustainability and diversification practices in tourism businesses. • Lack of public investment for diversification activities. • Non-structured and attractive valorisation of local and traditional heritage. • Lack of information on the potential of local resources and existing structures.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of knowledge and experience in applying for the EU Ecolabel and in registering to EMA. Lack of knowledge and experience on managing sustainable tourism in Natura 2000. • Lack of information on the opportunities that the use of the Natura 2000 logo could bring to local economies and nature conservation. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment opportunities generated, and thereby fostering economic growth in rural and coastal areas. • Boosting environmental protection through responsible tourism practices, in particular in protected areas. Existing partnerships between tourism stakeholders and conservation organisations to protect natural habitats and biodiversity in the Adriatic-Ionian area. • Sustainable agri-food, fishery and rural tourism practices, contributing to agricultural and fishery diversification developed. • Opportunities for community-based tourism enterprises, empowering locals to take ownership of tourism development created. • The existing macro-regional networks and routes have been consolidated, to foster the collaboration of rural and coastal tourism destinations and with other innovative stakeholders at local, regional and national level. • Decrease of waste generation by tourists, increase circularity of products in the tourism sector. • Increased uptake of EU Ecolabel and EMAS, resulting in increased offer of sustainable tourist services. This will translate in reduced environmental impacts from tourist accommodation and other tourist services. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A - New topic – to be developed 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Indicators will be developed as part of implementation				

4.3.4 Action – Promoting rural tourism

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Promoting rural tourism
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting Countryside activities: in mountains, lakes, rivers and forests, while ensuring its conservation. • Promoting Rural heritage activities: Traditional, Architecture, craft heritage, pre-history, castles and villages. • Promoting Rural life: Crafts, local events, Country food, Traditional music, ethnographic museums.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting Rural Activities: birding, cycling, walking, water sports. • Developing the professional capacities in decision-makers, tourist and rural actors in the development and management of rural cultural, historical, biodiversity and environmental routes. • Promoting existing, 'Bio-district-like' initiatives in the Adriatic-Ionian region and encouraging transfer of knowledge and good practice sharing.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of Rural Tourism in areas with low population density, landscape and land use dominated by agriculture and forestry, traditional social structure and lifestyle initiatives as part of the solution for a sustainable, innovative and responsible tourism sector in the Adriatic-Ionian region. • Coherent and systematic integration of the 'Bio-district' concept and experiences into the region-wide tourist offers as well as in tourist and rural development strategies and policies. • Increase the connection between tourism and agri-food sectors in most countries and regions. • Create institutional collaboration frameworks and platforms between tourism and agri-food actors. • Develop the interaction of small and medium-sized enterprises in agri-food and tourism. • Limit the mass 'sun-and-beach' tourism, especially during summer putting pressure on natural and cultural resources, thus reducing high pressure on the nature and environment in coastal tourist areas. • Mitigate the high footprints of tourism activities causing high environmental footprints. • Incorporation of cooperatives, groups of growers and social economy actors in the rural tourism activities. • Balance territorial distribution of tourism and rural agri-food activities in most countries. • Avoid the abandonment of rural areas and migration especially of the youth.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A positive trend of travel and tourism sector envisaged in the Adriatic-Ionian region envisaged in the coming years supported also by the good performances of some countries of the region. • The increasingly higher importance attached by the Strategy visitors to the three key dimensions (economic, social and ecological) of sustainable tourism as well as to innovative tourist offers capitalising on territorial identities. • The Adriatic-Ionian region has a long tradition of gastronomy, healthy cooking and Mediterranean diet that attracted in the past and will continue to lure many visitors interested in food-motivated travel. 'Bio-districts' can contribute to, preserve, and create economic value from food culture, traditions, original tastes and recipes in connection with their rural surroundings and historic heritage. • Diversity of traditional and typical agri-food products. • Developed agricultural, food and rural tourism sectors.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased awareness of tourism operators about sustainability. Ongoing green transitions in tourism and agri-food sectors. Enabling policy framework at the Strategy and EU level. Ensure nature conservation as the main support of tourism activities, and contribute to its protection whenever possible 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> N/A – New topic– to be developed 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Indicators will be developed as part of implementation				

4.3.5 Action – Promoting the Mediterranean diet and local, organic and origin production

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Promotion of the Mediterranean diet and local, organic and origin production
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exploit the value of geographical indications as driver of the development of rural tourism that can contribute to socio-economic diversification, rural communities development, and the enhancement of image. Increase the awareness, that GI is considered to be an essential commodity as well as an integral part of social and cultural heritage. Promote organic farming practices to enhance the sustainability of agricultural systems, supporting biodiversity and the health of ecosystems, which in turn strengthens the authenticity and appeal of the region's tourism offerings. Foster dialogue, concertation and collaboration between tourist operators and agri-food operators through multi-stakeholder mechanisms such as thematic platforms, living labs, open innovation hubs.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the connection between tourism and agri-food sectors in most countries and regions. Incorporate the Mediterranean diet which was registered by UNESCO in 2010 as world cultural heritage. Incorporate the local Origin Products which are considered as intellectual property rights of the local communities in the WTO. Enhance institutional collaboration frameworks and platforms between tourism and agri-food actors. Foster the interaction of small and medium-sized enterprises in agri-food and tourism.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit the mass 'sun-and-beach' tourism, especially during summer putting pressure on natural and cultural resources, thus reducing high pressure on the nature and environment in coastal tourist areas. • Mitigate the high footprints of tourism activities causing high environmental footprints. • Balance territorial distribution of tourism and agri-food activities in most countries. • Halt the abandonment of rural areas and migration especially of the youth. • Harmonisation of the regulatory frameworks ensuring the interaction between the tourism sector and agri-food one in line with the EU 'farm to fork' strategy. • Promote the use of the Natura 2000 logo on goods and services that are in line or contribute to the conservation of Natura 2000 sites. • Develop the necessary knowledge, skills and funds for tourism companies and destination management organisations to introduce and maintain new sustainable solutions. • Improve knowledge and skills of actors on the operationalisation of multifunctional linkages between tourism and agri-food. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A – New topic– to be developed 				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	Indicators will be developed as part of implementation				

5. Pillar 5 –Improved Social Cohesion

The Adriatic-Ionian region suffers from ageing, labour market disbalances, social exclusion, the inflow of refugees, poverty and brain drain. On top of this, it was to a large extent impacted by the pandemic, especially due to its dependency on tourism, highly affecting the labour market.

COVID-19 has exposed the region, as well as the rest of Europe, to further drastic changes in jobs, education, economy, welfare systems and social life. Furthermore, other challenges in the Adriatic-Ionian region are the demographic developments; ageing, the inflow of refugees, social exclusion of vulnerable groups and a general trend where societies become more polarised with poverty pockets. At the same time, the region has an active civil society which is an important asset for addressing social issues in the context of the Strategy.

The main objective of this pillar is to align the Adriatic-Ionian region with the EU strategies and policies for improving social cohesion, in line with the broader framework of the green and digital transition. These strategies and policies are designed to create a demand and supply for new and relevant skills, enhance the quality of education at all levels, swift adaptation to rapidly changing economic landscape and increase resilience toward future crisis. Pillar 5 should promote social cohesion, contribute from the macro-regional context to achieve equal opportunities, youth engagement and access to the labour market.

In this respect, specific attention should be given to the European Pillar of Social Rights, and in particular to the action plan for its implementation, endorsed by the three EU institutions, EU member states and European Social Partners and Civil Society Organisations at the Porto Social Summit on 7-8 May 2021.

Pillar 5 intends to address these challenges by taking into account the importance of preserving and promoting the European social model, as well as the aspirations of EU candidate countries to join the EU. Macro-regional cooperation through this pillar would be an additional tool for strengthening European and national policies in relevant fields. Cooperation would include exchange of experiences, coordination of policy measures, definition of priorities and standardisation of approaches to solving social challenges that transcend national borders. It will also work as a response to the requirements of the European Pillar of Social Rights initiative, and it will also be aligned with the pillar on human capital of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans.

The action plan identifies three areas for action – More and Better Jobs, Skills and Equality, Social Protection and Inclusion – and three targets for upward convergence:

- Employment: at least 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment by 2030.
- Training: at least 60% of all adults should be participating in training every year by 2030.
- Reducing Poverty: a reduction of at least 15 million of the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 2030.

As Pillar 5 was only decided upon in May 2023, it is still under development. The scope of the pillar will be further discussed and defined in the years to come. This work will be supported by the below actions.

The following topics include are:

- T1 Youth engagement and employment - empowerment of young generations, by increasing their capacity to actively participate in the social and economic life.
- T2 Promoting skills acquisition for future labour markets - promote life-long learning opportunities and access to the labour market for the Adriatic-Ionian population.
- T3 Equal opportunities in the labour market - by addressing current issues such as gender inequality and discrimination, gender pay gaps, irregular work, precariousness, labour exploitation.
- T4 Social Innovations - to promote pressing as for example active and healthy ageing as a response to a trend of ageing population in the region.

5.1.1 Action – Further development of the pillar on improved social cohesion

	Description of the action				
Name of the action	Further development of the pillar on improved social cohesion				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perform the strategic consultation with relevant (including civil society) stakeholders, as defined in the 'Background document with the Roadmap'. • Perform the thematic consultation with relevant (including civil society) stakeholders, as defined in the 'Background document with the Roadmap'. <p>In the context of the further elaboration of the topics framing this pillar also important social aspects such as equal opportunities, gender equality, social inclusion of vulnerable groups, fight against discrimination, active ageing and child poverty can be taken on board.</p>				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<p>to collect inputs from all national representatives of the Adriatic-Ionian region in a short period of time.</p> <p>to develop a new pillar aligned with the macro-regional needs and expectations.</p>				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	An effective new pillar aligned with the expectations and needs of the macro-region.				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	Not relevant.				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source

		relevant			
How to measure the activities under this action?	No. of stakeholder consultation activities under this pillar	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	1 (2024)	TSG

5.1 Topic – Youth engagement and employment

Global objectives. Goals regarding youth and youth policy's potential are stated in the EU youth strategy, which is the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for 2019-2027. Through 11 goals, the EU youth strategy should contribute to achieving a vision for young people by mobilising EU level policy instruments as well as actions at national, regional, and local level by all stakeholders. Collaboration on activities proposed will include various stakeholders in charge of youth. To stimulate the empowerment of young generations, in particular young women, by increasing their capacity to actively participate in the social and economic life, supporting their increased participation in society and labour market, and fostering their skills to enhance employability. It is important to involve youth in topics such as education, employment, cultural exchange, equal opportunities, gender equality, social inclusion and environment protection, and all topics that have an impact on young people's lives. Goals regarding youth and youth policy's potential are stated in the EU youth strategy and in the Youth action plan in the EU's external action¹⁹. The EU youth strategy is the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for 2019-2027. Through 11 goals, the EU youth strategy should contribute to achieving a vision for young people by mobilising EU level policy instruments as well as actions at national, regional, and local level by all stakeholders. The Youth action plan in the EU's external action is the EU's operational roadmap for engaging young people in EU external action. It aims to increase young people's voices in policy and decision-making, provide young people with the necessary skills and resources and foster opportunities for young people to network and exchange with their peers. Collaboration on proposed activities will include various stakeholders in charge of youth.

Strategy objectives. The Strategy should give to their young population the tools and mechanisms that will help them build their own capacities, foster their skills, and allow them to develop innovative and entrepreneurial thinking, in order to be properly equipped for tackling joint existing and future challenges within the region. This should not be limited to the capitals and cities, but it should include youth from rural areas.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, and the challenges and opportunities below, the activities under this topic aim at:

- creating a stronger link with EU policies;
- amplifying the voice of young people in public policymaking as actors of change and including young people and youth representatives in the decision-making process, e.g. through setting up a Strategy Youth Council;

¹⁹ Youth action plan in EU external action 2022 – 2027, JOIN(2022) 53 final.

- including youth representatives in the development and implementation of the Strategy to make it more inclusive; and
- promoting activities aiming at increased youth employability, focusing on skills, quality of education, apprenticeships/traineeships and matching with employers/sectors in demand for workers.

5.1.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Existing youth councils at national level.
- Existing and active civil society.
- Some of the Adriatic-Ionian countries already have well-established cooperation programmes between youth representatives and governing bodies.
- Existing tools and initiatives at the EU level, such as EU Youth Dialogue and ALMA initiative; The EU-funded Western Balkans Youth Labs.
- Existing POPRI network of technology parks.
- Youth empowerment for more competitive participation in the labour market.
- Development of new digital skills attractive for young people.
- Capacity building activities for schools, VET, Youth, Sport and Higher Education.

Challenges:

- Difficulty in engaging, and communicating with the local youth.
- Lack of involvement and experience of youth in the Strategy and Interreg programmes.
- Lack of knowledge of The Manifesto for Young People by Young People to Shape the European Cooperation Policy.
- Social exclusion of young people in vulnerable groups, including high dropout rates.
- Obstacles in outreach to young people neither in employment nor in education or training in activation programmes.
- Limited access to entrepreneurial knowledge and skills relevant to labour market needs.
- Opportunities still unbalanced between men and women.
- High youth unemployment rates.
- Skills mismatch between education and the labour market.
- Lack of career guidance and entrepreneurship support.
- Brain drain and skilled workforce shortages.
- VET programmes are often underdeveloped and disconnected from market needs, and there is a limited cooperation between schools and industries.

5.1.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** Within the topic youth engagement and employment, activities will be oriented to help the candidate countries to better integrate with EU member states in field of youth policies and participatory approaches to youth empowerment and start adjusting to the EU Youth Policy, and the European Pillar of Social Rights. Regarding the *EU acquis*, activities are aligned with Chapter 26 Education and culture which put focus on Council Recommendations in several areas related to school, vocational, higher, and adult education, youth volunteering and mobility.
- **Capacity building.** The activities help to build capacities among the youth representatives involved as well as among other players concerning the strengthened involvement of youth representatives. Activities will aim at strengthening awareness of the importance of active involvement of young people in the macro-regional Strategy, through training programmes, workshops, participation in online meeting and conferences, etc. This is in accordance with Youth Goal 1 Connecting EU with Youth and Goal 11 Youth Organisations & European Programmes. Activities will also help boost youth employability.
- **Innovation and research.** The activities contribute to social innovation linked to the involvement of youth representatives as drivers of change. They will be encouraged to develop new innovative solutions within the activities carried out through this topic. Most topics described under this pillar, especially those related to acquisition of (cutting-edge) knowledge and skills for the future of youngsters and adults, go hand in hand with the respective S3s goals and contribute to social cohesion in the region.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** Cooperation between the education system and the economic sector is extremely important. The emphasis must be on creating skills and jobs that are guided by the principles of circular economy that are applicable in the labour market, and such skills and professions such skills and professions need planned and long-term investments.
- **Green rural development.** The topic does not include an explicit link to green rural development activities, but activities will include promotion of youth development in green and rural development, and focus will be placed on creating employment opportunities for green jobs in rural areas according to dual transition framework. Activities envisaged through this topic are in accordance with Goal 6 'Moving Rural Youth Forward' of the EU youth strategy, to ensure sustainable, high-quality jobs created and accessible to young people in rural areas. Also, to ensure active participating of young people in rural areas in decision-making processes (especially in the Strategy's EUSAIR Youth Council), and to be aware of importance of protection of rural traditions. Supporting attractiveness of rural areas for young people by supporting smart community/village concept also based on experiences in other macro regions.
- **Digitalisation.** The development of different forms of digital skills attractive to young people will lead to an increase in young people's interest in digital jobs, leading to a greater degree of digitalisation in line with the dual transition.

5.1.3 Action – Promoting empowerment and involvement of youth

	Description of the action
Name of the	Promoting empowerment and involvement of youth

action					
What are the envisaged activities?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange of good practices in creation and implementation of national youth policies. • Address the Ministerial Declaration for youth empowerment adopted at the Annual Forum held in Tirana in May 2022. 			
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social exclusion of vulnerable groups such as young people neither in employment nor in education or training. • Building capacities regarding identification of youth needs, enhancing skills and fostering civic engagement. • Difficulty in obtaining engagement and communicating with the local youth. • Involvement of youth in the Strategy and Interreg programmes. • Lack of awareness of importance to implement needs of youth in broader policy making. • Existing youth councils at national level. • Some of the participating countries' already have well-established cooperation programmes between youth representatives and governing bodies. • The existing network of youth in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. 			
What are the expected results/targets of the action?		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger engagement of young people with EU, macro-regional and national policies. <p>Young people from candidate countries will be empowered through sharing experiences with their EU colleagues.</p>			
Strategy flagships and strategic projects		/ The flagships for this topic is further support and development of the POPRI youth process as a mechanism for knowledge transfer and improving the employability of young people in the Strategy. The established Strategy Knowledge Hub, composed of technology parks, schools, incubators and companies, will continue under this flagship as it provides young people with entrepreneurial skills to make them innovative, skilled and employable, thus contributing to global and Strategy objectives.			
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Number of public events to promote empowerment and involvement of youth	RCO115 Public events across borders jointly organised	0 (2023)	6 (2030)	TSG5
	RI: Recommendations on implementation of EU policies regarding youth adopted on macro-regional level	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR79 Interreg: Joint	0 (2023)	2 (2030)	TSG5

		strategies and action plans taken up by organisations			
	RI: Number of Interreg projects in the Adriatic-Ionian region involving youth	N/A	0 (2023)	5 (2030)	Facility Point and TSGs

5.1.4 Action – Boosting youth employment

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Boosting youth employment
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exchange of good practices in Youth Guarantee implementation (public employment services, youth workers and youth workers associations, relevant EU and other funds managing authorities, etc.) • Exchange of good practices in active measures for access of youth to labour market, prevention of youth's exploitation and promotion of equality and non-discrimination of youth in the labour market and the society. • Exchange of good practices on preventive approaches/measures to reduce the risk of becoming young people neither in employment nor in education or training focusing on youth at a higher risk of early school leaving in cooperation with social partners • Promote EU tools and initiatives in the field of youth employment, such as ALMA initiative. • Capacity building for youth to enhance skills and improve job prospects. • Capacity building in schools, VET and higher education to modernise education, enhance employability, and promote regional cooperation.
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High rates of youth unemployment and young people neither in employment nor in education or training. • Different employment rates between men and women. • Risk of brain drain since young people seek employment abroad. • Existing EU and national frameworks to promote youth employment and activation of young people neither in employment nor in education or training. • Existing ALMPs available to young people. • Skills mismatch between education and the labour market. • Lack of career guidance and entrepreneurship support. • VET programmes are often underdeveloped and disconnected from market needs, and there is a limited cooperation between schools and industries.
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harmonisation of youth employment policies at the macro-regional level. • Implementation of EU policy framework and initiatives for youth employment and activation on the labour market • Strengthening of preconditions for better employment of young people.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancement of youth employability through an improvement of education. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	/				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Number of public events to harmonise youth employment policies	RCO115 Interreg: Public events across borders jointly organised	0 (2023)	6 (2030)	TSG5
	RI: Recommendations on implementation of EU policies regarding youth employment adopted on macro-regional level	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0 (2023)	2 (2030)	TSG

5.2 Topic – Promoting skills acquisition for future labour markets

Global objectives. The global objectives of this topic are to promote life-long learning opportunities and access to the labour market for the Adriatic-Ionian population, by addressing current issues such as quality of education, skills mismatching, brain drain, underemployment and precariousness, and technological changes. To promote respect for diversities and equal opportunities in a social and economic environment free from discrimination is a strong asset to promote sustainable development, to contribute to the 2030 Agenda objectives, and to promote innovation at large. Better cooperation and exchange can pave the way to enhance social cohesion in the region, and promote quality of life, encouraging economic and social development.

Strategy objectives. The Strategy should promote harmonisation of skill policies in the macro-region. That includes joint work in development of school, higher education, VET and adult education curricula and supporting their implementation. Since other pillar address sectoral skills (blue economy, tourism), activities under this topic should also pay closer look at supporting such activities. Objectives include a boost in upskilling/reskilling opportunities, better targeting of skill policies for disadvantaged groups, such as people with disabilities, women, Roma etc.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, and the challenges and opportunities below, the activities under this topic aim at:

- supporting policy harmonisation in macro-region with emphasis on implementation of EU skills frameworks and initiatives;
- modernisation of school, higher education, VET and adult education curricula in line with the labour market needs;
- skills development for future labour markets.

5.2.1 Strategy specificities opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Existing networks of educational institutions at all levels
- Cooperation between PES (Public Employment Services), training institutions, social partners
- Established EU policy frameworks and support from EU institutions
- Development of programmes focused on the inclusion of disadvantaged groups into the labour market
- Capacity building in schools, VET and higher education

Challenges:

- Brain drain, due to high levels of labour immigration
- Unemployment, underemployment, precariousness and general lack of opportunities – targets are far from the targets adopted by the EU
- High rates of early leavers from school in some of the regions
- Low rates of participation in adult education
- Low perception and desirability of VET
- Large gender employment gap in the entire Adriatic-Ionian region
- Segregation in the educational system
- Limited use of technology and digital tools in education
- Skills mismatch between education and labour market needs
- Outdated curricula and teaching methods
- Poor links between VET schools and industries
- Limited apprenticeships and internships
- Frequent policy changes and lack of a long-term education strategy

5.2.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The activities will help the candidate countries to better integrate with EU

Member States in field of education and skills policies, supporting the participation of the candidate countries in the European Education Area, the European pillar of Social Rights and activities related to reducing the brain drain from EU candidate countries to EU member states. These activities are closely aligned with Chapter 19 *Social policy and employment of acquis* which includes adoption of minimum standards in the areas of labour law, equality, health, and safety at work and anti-discrimination. Chapter 26 *Education and culture of acquis* consists of Council Recommendations in areas related to school, vocational, higher, and adult education, youth volunteering and mobility, numerous Council Conclusions and Resolutions.

- **Capacity building.** The activities are all geared towards increasing capacities, skills and the quality of education in the region through supporting the development of apprenticeship schemes and work-based learning respecting equal possibilities for all. Capacity-building activities will be focused on promotion of open-mindedness and supporting the development of interpersonal and intercultural skills. Sharing knowledge and experiences in creating and implementing more personalised, participative, and cooperative learner-centred methods of the education process is another way how to strengthen capacities of young people within the Strategy.
- **Innovation and research.** Majority of topics described under this pillar especially those related to acquisition of (cutting-edge) knowledge and skills for the future of youngsters and adults go hand in hand with respective S3s goals and contribute in best manner to social cohesion in the region. The activities may contribute to innovation by empowering more people to enter research activities and encouraging cooperation between countries on development of innovative solution for decreasing high rates of early leavers from school and increasing the rates of participation in adult education on the other hand. The approaches in increasing skills and reaching out to the relevant target groups may also include aspects of policy innovation. Innovation and research processes will be encouraged in creating new ways to stop the brain drain.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** The topic does not include an explicit link to circular economy activities, but activities within this topic will be oriented to raise awareness on importance of circular economy and its benefits. Using already developed tools (and potentially new ones) of the circular economy for skills development and upscale.
- **Green rural development.** Since skills are daily transformed and modernised, it is necessary to take care of the simultaneous development of the green economy, and to forecast activities which will ensure balanced skills supply/demand for green rural development. It is important to ensure equal access to high-quality education for young people and afterwards, sustainable, high-quality jobs, accessible to young people in rural areas.
- **Digitalisation.** The digital transition can be supported e.g. through the activities increasing the skills level in the region related to digital literacy and encouraging the use of digital learning tools. Also, due to rapidly transforming technological and socio-economic reality it is necessary to adapt digital skills in a framework of dual transition.

5.2.3 Action – Harmonisation of skills policies

	Description of the action
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Name of the action	Development and harmonisation of skills policies				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and capacity building programmes that encourage higher education, VET and adult education. • Exchange of good practices in mapping and tracking skills needs (with the emphasis on green and digital transition). • Exchange of good practices in development of curricula for schools, higher education, VET and adult education in line with the needs of the labour market (European qualification framework) including disadvantaged groups. • Support programmes that offer soft skills related to macro-regional cooperation and civil society. • Cooperation between all stakeholders in promoting VET excellence. • Exchange of good practices in development of platforms and tools for the implementation of EU initiatives, such as recommendations on individual learning accounts and micro-qualifications. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low level of participation in adult education. • High rates of early leavers from school in some of the regions. • Existing experience in ALMPs implementation. • Skills mismatch between education and labour market needs • Outdated curricula and teaching methods • Frequent policy changes and lack of a long-term education strategy 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective skills policies with better targeting of disadvantaged groups. • Better adaptation to future labour market needs. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	Possible flagships could build on transnational projects aiming to harmonise curricula in VET and adult education.				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: Number of public events promoting skills	RCO115 Public events across borders jointly organised	0 (2023)	6 (2030)	TSG5
	RI: Recommendations on implementation of EU policies regarding skills adopted on macro-regional level	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and	0 (2023)	2 (2030)	TSG5

		action plans taken up by organisations			
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5.2.4 Action – Promoting employment opportunities through upskilling/reskilling for disadvantaged groups on the labour market

	Description of the action				
Name of the action	Promoting employment opportunities through upskilling/reskilling for disadvantaged groups on the labour market				
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support participation of disadvantaged groups in upskilling/reskilling programmes, based on their needs (needs assessment could widely differ between groups). • Support development of school, higher education, VET and adult education curricula in line with labour market needs. • Support programmes that promote inclusive and equal work environments based on their needs (needs assessment could widely differ between groups). • Involvement of civil society and equality bodies (i.e. agencies, NGOs advocating for equal rights) in the preparation of the activities. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brain drain. • Unemployment, underemployment, precariousness, and general lack of opportunities. • Large gender employment gap in the entire Adriatic-Ionian region. • Financing opportunities through the European Social Fund Plus, IPA, Erasmus+ and INTERREG. • Targeting groups of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups to promote participation in education and employment • Many disadvantaged groups, especially Roma communities and rural populations, drop out of school early due to financial difficulties or social exclusion • Lack of tailored vocational and adult education programs to meet their needs. <p>Digital divide: Limited access to computers, internet, and online training tools, especially in rural areas.</p>				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher participation level of disadvantaged groups in school, higher education, VET and adult education. • Better quality of upskilling/reskilling programmes. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	/				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source

		relevant			
How to measure the activities under this action?	Capacity-building events across borders jointly organised	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes RCR81 Interreg: Completion of joint training schemes	0 (2023)	8 (2030)	TSG5
	Capacities for upskilling/reskilling on macro-regional level strengthened	RCO85 Interreg: Participations in joint training schemes RCR81 Interreg: Completion of joint training schemes	0 (2023)	1 p.a. (2030)	TSG5

5.3 Topic - Equal opportunities in the labour market

Global objectives. The global objectives of this topic are to promote gender equality and decent work in the Adriatic-Ionian region, by addressing current issues such as gender inequality and discrimination, gender pay gaps, irregular work, precariousness, labour exploitation (especially for seasonal and cross-border labour, and particularly in sectors like tourism, agriculture and aquaculture, services connected to transport, home care). To promote respect for diversities and equal opportunities in a social and economic environment free from discrimination is a strong asset to promote sustainable development, to contribute to the 2030 Agenda objectives, to achieve the targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights and to promote innovation at large. Better cooperation and exchange can pave the way to enhance cohesion in the region, and promote quality of life, encouraging economic and social development.

Strategy objectives. Objectives include better cooperation, coordination, and exchange of best practices between public administrations, PES, labour inspectorates, social partners, and civil society, to address phenomena of labour exploitation and discrimination and build an equal and inclusive labour environment. Groups such women at work, vulnerable categories of workers, mobile seasonal and migrant workers will be targeted and address the possible burden of double vulnerabilities i.e. migrant women, women in rural areas, etc.

Specific objectives of the topic

In light of the above objectives, and the challenges and opportunities below, the activities under this topic aim at:

- supporting people in the Adriatic-Ionian region to overcome and prevent gender discrimination at work and labour exploitation, and to build gender equality and decent work, in line with the principles and targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights;
- promoting equal opportunities in the labour market and thus reduce the gender gaps and discrimination in terms of employment and payment; and
- better protecting labour rights and conditions of the local population, and thereby increase the employment rate and reduce gender related poverty.

5.3.1 Strategy specificities, opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above objectives, the Adriatic-Ionian region faces a number of specific challenges and opportunities which the revised action plan aims to address.

Opportunities:

- Existing networks and cooperation between PES (Public Employment Services), labour inspectorates, and stakeholders notably social partners.
- Existing EU, national and regional legislation and regulations.
- Existing collective agreements and framework agreements.

Challenges:

- Gender discrimination at work.
- Gender pay gap.
- Glass ceiling for women's career opportunities.
- Lack of social protection and services for women.
- Pension segregation.
- Unemployment, underemployment, precariousness, and general lack of opportunities – targets are far from the targets adopted by the EU.
- Irregular work, labour exploitation – especially for seasonal and cross-border labour, and particularly in sectors like tourism, agriculture and aquaculture, services connected to transport, home care.

5.3.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic contribute actively to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised action plan.

Horizontal topics:

- **Enlargement.** The activities of this topic will help the candidate countries to better integrate with EU member states in field of gender equality and quality of employment, fight against discrimination, the European Pillar of Social Rights and activities related to reducing labour discrimination and exploitation. Activities will support mutual learning process and sharing practices in creating measures for reducing gender discrimination. Proposed activities are aligned with Chapter 19 *Social policy and employment of acquis* which includes minimum standards in the areas of labour law, equality, health and safety at work and anti-discrimination. Also, activities will focus on finding and exchanging experiences in creating

quality jobs which guarantee fair working conditions, working rights and the right of living wage for all young people, in accordance with goal 7 of the EU youth strategy.

- **Capacity building.** The activities are all geared towards increasing capacities equal opportunities in the labour market and equality and quality of employment. Also, activities will help in development of civic and social skills to empower citizens and other stakeholders and increase their sensitivity to gender inequality and labour exploitation prevention. It is important to strengthen the linkage between stakeholders, such as relevant regional administrations, employers, ministries of employment, civil rights and gender equality organisations, with the objective of sharing experiences from all sides and finding common solutions for equal opportunities in the labour market.
- **Innovation and research.** The activities may contribute to increase research activities and innovation in the fields of gender equality and quality of employment. The activities to address discrimination and exploitation, based on existing legal framework and regulation, may improve their implementation and introduce elements of policy innovation.

Cross-cutting topics:

- **Circular economy.** The topic does not include an explicit link to circular economy activities.
- **Green rural development.** Activities promoting gender equality and quality of employment are especially emphasised, since women in rural areas are usually less paid and have less opportunities for employment. Gaining new knowledges about possibilities for green and rural development could lead to better opportunities and equal possibilities in labour market.
- **Digitalisation.** The digital transition can be supported e.g. through the activities increasing the skills level in the region related to digital literacy. New digital skills and learning tools equally available to both women and men will help to promote diversities and equal opportunities in a social and economic environment.

5.3.3 [Action – Enhance Strategy cooperation and exchange of best practices on gender equality and quality of employment](#)

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Enhance Strategy cooperation and exchange of best practices on gender equality and quality of employment
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of cooperation and exchange of best practices on Gender Equality and Quality of Employment, involving: EU DG Employment, European Labour Authority, Ministries of Employment, PES (Public Employment Services), Labour Inspectorates, Relevant Regional Administrations, Social Partners, Gender equality organisations, Uniadriion. • Support preventive approaches/measures to reduce gender discrimination at work, gender pay gap, glass ceiling for women's career opportunities, lack of social protection and services for women, pension segregation affecting women. • Development of cooperation and exchange of best practices to reduce irregular work, precariousness, labour exploitation – especially for

	<p>seasonal and cross-border labour, and particularly in sectors like tourism, agriculture and aquaculture, services connected to transport, home care.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop research and analysis to map and track such phenomena in the region. • Development of cooperation and exchange of best practices for the full implementation of existing legislation and regulations in the fields of gender equality and decent work. • Improve cooperation on gender equality and decent work among stakeholders active in the region. 				
Which challenges and opportunities is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of gender discrimination in the region. • High levels of unemployment, underemployment, precariousness, and general lack of opportunities in the region. • High level of irregular work, precariousness, labour exploitation – especially for seasonal and cross-border labour, and particularly in sectors like tourism, agriculture and aquaculture, services connected to transport, home care. • Need to promote gender equality and decent work, and to combat discrimination and exploitation, through better analysis, coordination and cooperation, and policy action. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better cooperation in prevention of gender discrimination and labour exploitation. • Improved protection of rights and social inclusion in the region. • Developed preventive approaches/measures to reduce gender discrimination. • Gender issues in the region mapped and tracked supporting research and actions 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	/				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: No. of activities supporting the share of practices on prevention of gender discrimination and promoting gender equality	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 p.a. (2023)	6 (2030)	TSG5
	OI: No. of activities supporting the share of practices on prevention of labour exploitation and	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 (2023)	6 (2030)	TSG5

	decent work promotion				
	RI: Recommendations on implementation of EU policies regarding prevention of gender discrimination adopted on macro-regional level	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0 (2023)	2 (2030)	TSG5
	RI: Recommendations on implementation of EU labour policy initiatives adopted on macro-regional level	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0 (2023)	2 (2030)	TSG5

5.4 Topic - Social Innovations

Global objectives. The global objectives of the Social Innovations topic are to further promote this concept in the Adriatic-Ionian region by addressing some of the most pressing issues that for example include active and healthy ageing as a response to a trend of ageing population in the region and in developed countries. Better cooperation and knowledge transfer between stakeholders can promote the field of social innovations in the region and enhance the overall wellbeing of individuals, including vulnerable groups such as older people and people with disabilities, while indirectly contributing to overall better wellbeing and quality of life in our society as a whole.

Social innovations also enable the opportunity for knowledge transfer between different stakeholders. State-of-the art analysis reveals that social innovations were successfully applied in numerous fields, including active and healthy ageing and many other fields that have an important societal impact. Implementing such solutions is especially beneficial for socially vulnerable groups or individuals that we will address within the scope of this topic.

Strategy objectives. Objectives include better collaboration and knowledge transfer between national and public bodies, research and academia, business world and other organisations, and professional and general public. Groups such as older people and people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups will be targeted within the topic of Social Innovations, while at the same time we must not neglect the population as a whole.

Specific objectives of the topic

As a summary of the written text, we can conclude that the activities under the topic of Social Innovations aim at:

- promoting existing solutions for social innovations and social economy;
- strengthening the capacities of decision-makers and transfer of knowledge in the field of social innovations;
- increasing the visibility of the social economy sector as attractive employer by combining economic, sustainable and social goals;
- promoting an active, strategic approach to the field of social innovation/social economy;
- providing professional support in training and education to vulnerable groups;
- information campaigns on the funding possibilities from EU and national level;
- promoting age friendly and inclusive environments for all age groups;
- enhancing life-long learning and knowledge-interaction for all generations.

5.4.1 Strategy specificities, opportunities & challenges

Linked to the above, we would like to highlight some potential opportunities and challenges.

Opportunities

- Using the full potential of already established networks and collaboration between different stakeholders functioning in the field of social innovation and social economy.
- Gaining new knowledges regarding social economy.
- Development of social innovation opportunities for vulnerable groups.
- Development of new social innovation opportunities for active and healthy ageing.
- Following the quadruple helix approach, including members from research and academia, municipalities, ministries and other national and public bodies, and other interested stakeholders.
- Extending on existing EU, national and regional frameworks.

Challenges

- Connecting stakeholders to an ecosystem of social innovations and social economy.
- Above-average and rapid growth of older adults.
- Life-long learning for all generations.
- Providing appropriate training and education to vulnerable groups.
- Intergenerational knowledge transfer.
- Identifying social innovations that are the invention, development and implementation phase.
- Potential knowledge loss due to retirement and turnover.
- Providing age friendly and inclusive environments.

5.4.2 Support to horizontal and cross-cutting topics

Activities under this topic are well aligned to the horizontal and cross-cutting topics of the revised version of the action plan.

Horizontal topics

- **Enlargement.** The activities help involved countries to develop and better function in the field of social innovation/social economy and to provide a better environment that enables higher quality of life and improvements in wellbeing for individuals, groups and society as a whole and thus approximating to EU Standards in the social area.
- Also, all countries will be encouraged to participate in the Employment and Social Innovation strand of the European Social Fund Plus and to develop their social innovation policies. Activities within this topic are aligned with stated in Chapter 19 Social policy and employment and in Chapter 26 Education and culture of *acquis*,
- **Capacity building.** All activities actively promote increased capacities of all included stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on policy and decision-makers aiming to recognise social innovation as one of the drivers of an inclusive society.
- **Innovation and research.** In line with this topic, it is integral that the research world and academia are included. Also, the aim of these activities is to support innovative and sustainable social innovations systems.

Cross-cutting topics

- **Circular economy.** The topic does not include an explicit link to this activity.
- **Green rural development.** The topic does not include an explicit link to this activity. Using smart community/village concept to support vulnerable groups in rural areas, supporting living conditions based also on experiences of other macro regions.
- **Digitalisation.** Digital skills are one important element when it comes to social innovations, especially as the availability of digital technologies provides value to knowledge transfer. One important avenue of this topic is also to increase the overall levels of digital literacy.

5.4.3 Action - Adriatic-Ionian Ecosystem for Social Innovation

	Description of the action
Name of the action	Adriatic-Ionian Ecosystem for Social Innovation
What are the envisaged activities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting existing social innovation and social economy ecosystems that include a broad range of stakeholders and promote collaboration and knowledge transfer. • Supporting the region with development of activities to overcome the challenges associated with ageing of the population. • Promoting measures aimed at strengthening the capacities and knowledge transfer of decision and policy makers in the field of social innovations/social economy. • Promoting active, strategic approaches and measures in the field of social innovations/social economy. • Sharing practices in developing training and education programmes for vulnerable groups. • Supporting activities related to life-long learning and knowledge-interaction for all age groups.
Which challenges and opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the full potential of existing network for social innovations/social economy.

is this action addressing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaining knowledge from the quadruple helix approach and its members. • High level of older adults in the region. • Higher level of individuals included in the process of life-long learning. • Lack of age friendly and inclusive environments. • Reduce knowledge loss due to retirement and turnover. • Developing connections between stakeholders engaged in the field of social innovation/social economy. 				
What are the expected results/targets of the action?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced awareness and knowledge about the field of social innovation/social economy. • Improved quality of life and wellbeing of people, especially people in vulnerable groups such as older adults. • The region strengthened to respond to current and future social problems. 				
Strategy flagships and strategic projects	Possible flagships could build on the existing state within EU and national frameworks in the field of social innovations/social economy and include a vast number of potential activities between included stakeholders on all levels, local, regional, national and cross-national.				
Indicators	Indicator name	Common Indicator name and code, if relevant	Baseline value and year	Target value and year	Data source
How to measure the activities under this action?	OI: No. of activities supporting the share of practices in the field of social innovation/social economy	RCO81 Interreg: Participation in joint actions across borders	0 (2023)	6 (2030)	TSG5
	RI: Recommendations on EU level social innovation/economy initiatives adopted on macro-regional level	RCO83 Interreg: Strategies and action plans jointly developed RCR79 Interreg: Joint strategies and action plans taken up by organisations	0 (2023)	2 (2030)	TSG5

6. Annexes

Annex 1 – relevant policies

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
Pillar 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The UN Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals – in particular, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all) and 14 (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development) Convention on the protection of the Mediterranean Sea against pollution (Barcelona Convention) [Document 21976A0216(01)] and its Protocols The Paris Protocol – A blueprint for tackling global climate change beyond 2020 [COM/2015/081 final] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The European Green Deal [COM(2019) 640 final] A Farm to Fork Strategy [COM(2020) 381 final] A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 [COM(2021) 345 final] A sustainable Bioeconomy for Europe: Strengthening the connection between economy, society and the environment [COM(2018) 673 final] And Bioeconomy Progress Report (2022). Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) [DIRECTIVE 2008/56/EC] and Water Framework Directive (WFD) [Directive 2000/60/EC] - including in terms of Good Environmental Status and restoration of aquatic ecosystems The Nature Restoration Law²⁰
Specific to Topic 1.1 Blue and green technologies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A new Circular Economy Action Plan [COM(2020) 98 final] Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 [COM(2020) 380 final] Digitising European Industry: Reaping the full benefits of the “Shaping Europe’s digital future” [COM(2020) 67 final] and the

²⁰ The EU has adopted the Nature Restoration Law on 17 June 2024 to contribute to the continuous, long-term and sustained recovery of biodiverse and resilient nature across the EU’s land and sea areas through the restoration of ecosystems. The law establishes a framework in which Member States will put in place restoration measures which together shall cover at least 20% of the EU’s land and sea areas by 2030 and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. This builds on the headline ambition set out in the biodiversity strategy that by 2050 all ecosystems are restored, resilient and adequately protected, and that, as a milestone, Europe's biodiversity is on the path to recovery by 2030. It is recognised that restoring nature will significantly contribute to the EU’s climate mitigation and adaptation objectives, to prevent and mitigate the impact of natural disasters, and to the EU’s international commitments

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<p>“Digital Europe Programme” [Regulation (EU) 2021/694</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Cluster Partnerships • European Missions [COM(2021) 609 final]] and especially the Mission Ocean and waters • European Research Area (ERA) • A New European Innovation Agenda [COM(2022) 332 final] • Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans [SWD(2020) 223 final] • Pact for skills - upskilling shipbuilding and maritime technology workers in Europe • REPowerEU Plan [COM(2022) 230 final] • Strengthening Innovation in Europe's Regions: Strategies for resilient, inclusive and sustainable growth [COM(2017) 376 final] • Sustainable Blue Economy [COM(2021) 240 final] • Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership [Horizon Europe] • Territorial Agenda 2030 - A future for all places • Zero Emission Waterborne Platform Partnership [Horizon Europe] • The EU Action Plan: 'Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil' • Communication 'Towards a strong and sustainable EU algae sector' • The Marine Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD) • •
Specific to Topic 1.2 Fisheries and aquaculture	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blue Transformation roadmap 2022-2023 • The Common Fisheries Policy [Regulation (EU) no. 1380/2013 of 11 December 2013]

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy [(COM(2018) 28 final] • The EU's Directive on single-use plastics [Directive (EU) 2019/904] • The EU's Directive establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning [Directive 2014/89/EU]. • Directive on Nitrates [91/676/EEC] • EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 [COM(2020) 380 final] • The Nature Restoration Law • GFCM 2030 Strategy for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea • Malta MEDFISH4EVER Ministerial Declaration • Strategic guidelines for a more sustainable and competitive EU aquaculture for the period 2021 to 2030 [COM (2021) 236 final] • Natura 2000 Directives (2009/147/CE and 92/43/CEE) • EU Fisheries Package 2023 (February 2023): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. <i>Communication on the Energy Transition of the EU Fisheries and Aquaculture sector</i> ii. <i>Communication on the common fisheries policy today and tomorrow</i> iii. <i>Report on the Common Market Organisation for fishery and aquaculture products</i>
Specific to Topic 1.3 Maritime and marine governance and services	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protocol on Integrated Coastal Zone Management in the Mediterranean [2010/631/EU] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive on establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning [2014/89/EU] • European Research Area (ERA) • European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<p>fairness and resilience [COM(2020) 274 final]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable Blue Economy [COM(2021) 240 final] • Territorial Agenda 2030 - A future for all places • The European Green Deal [COM (2019) 640 final] • The European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy [(COM(2018) 28 final] • The EU Action Plan: 'Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil'
Pillar 2	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Paris Protocol – A blueprint for tackling global climate change beyond 2020 [COM/2015/081 final] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 [COM(2021) 345 final]
Specific to Topic 2.1 Maritime transport	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new Circular Economy Action Plan [COM(2020) 98 final] • Directive on port reception facilities for ship-generated waste and cargo residues [2000/59/EC] • Directive on port reception facilities for the delivery of waste from ships [(EU) 2019/883] • Directive on river information services [2005/44/EC] • Directives and regulations on digital maritime systems and services, including on the European Maritime Single Window (EMSW) [2005/44/EC, 2010/65/EU, (EU) 2019/1239, (EU) 2023/204, (EU) 2023/205] • Regulation on the security on ships and in port facilities [(EC) No 725/2004] • Regulation (EU) 1315/2013 on Union guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network, currently

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<p>under repeal by the Proposal of the European Commission for the new TEN-T Regulation.]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulation (EU) 2021/1153 establishing the Connecting Europe Facility and repealing Regulations (EU) 1316/2013 and (EU) 283/2014, currently under amendment by the Proposal of the European Commission for the new TEN-T Regulation • Regulation (EU) 913/2010 concerning a European rail network for competitive freight, setting up the EU Rail Freight Corridors, currently under: a) amendment by the Proposal of the European Commission for the new TEN-T Regulation and b) potential repeal by the Proposal of the European Commission for a Regulation on the use of railway infrastructure capacity, with effect from December 2023 • The Fuel EU Maritime initiative. • The EU AFIR Initiative
Specific to Topic 2.2 Multimodal connectivity	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive laying down for certain road vehicles circulating within the Community the maximum authorised dimensions in national and international traffic and the maximum authorised weights in international traffic (Text with EEA relevance) [(EU) 2015/719] • Directive on the establishment of common rules for certain types of combined transport of goods between Member States [92/106/EEC] • Regulation concerning a European rail network for competitive freight, setting up the European Rail Freight Corridors, currently under revision [(EU) 913/2010] • Regulation on Union guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network [(EU) No 1315/2013]
Specific to Topic 2.3 Urban nodes	

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulation on guidelines for trans-European energy infrastructure and repealing [No 347/2013] • Territorial Agenda 2030 - A future for all places • The New EU Urban Mobility Framework [COM(2021) 811 final]
Specific to Topic 2.4 Renewable energy sources	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans [COM(2020) 641 final] • A Renovation Wave for Europe Strategy: Greening our Buildings, Creating Jobs, Improving Lives [COM(2020)662 final] • Directive on Energy Efficiency [(EU) 2018/2002] • Directive on Energy Performance of Buildings [(EU) 2018/844] • Directive on the Promotion of the Use of Energy from Renewable Sources [(EU) 2018/2001] • European Investment Bank (EIB) Guidelines for (Energy) Project Financing and Risk Assessment • Fit for 55 Package: Clean Energy for All Europeans Package • REPowerEU Plan [COM(2022) 230 final] • The Energy Community Treaty [2006/500/EC] • A Europe fit for the digital age
Specific to Topic 2.5 "Future-proof energy networks	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Central and South Eastern Europe energy connectivity (CESEC) • East Mediterranean Gas Forum - Long-term strategy • South East Europe 2030 Strategy (Regional Cooperation Council) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans [COM(2020) 641 final] • Council Regulation on enhancing solidarity through better coordination of gas purchases, reliable price benchmarks and exchanges of gas across borders [(EU) 2022/2576] • European Investment Bank (EIB) Guidelines for (Energy) Project Financing and Risk Assessment • Fit for 55 Package: Clean Energy for All Europeans Package

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans [SWD(2020) 223 final] Regulation on guidelines for trans-European energy infrastructure and repealing (TEN-T) [No 347/2013] Regulation on Union guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network [(EU) No 1315/2013] REPowerEU Plan [COM(2022) 230 final] and Strategy for EU External Energy Engagement [REPowerEU] The Energy Community Treaty [2006/500/EC] The European Green Deal [COM (2019) 640 final] Directive on common rules for the internal market for electricity [(EU) 2019/944] Regulation concerning measures to safeguard the security of gas supply [(EU) 2017/1938, (EU) 2022/1032] Regulation on risk-preparedness in the electricity sector [(EU) 2019/941] Regulation on the Governance of the Energy Union and Action to Confront Climate Change [(EU) 2018/1999] Regulation on the internal market for electricity [(EU) 2019/943]
Pillar 3	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The UN Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals UN Convention Biological Diversity and its Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework Convention on the protection of the Mediterranean Sea against pollution (Barcelona Convention) [Document 21976A0216(01)] and its Protocols Convention on the conservation of migratory species of wild animals [Document 21979A0623(01)] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The European Green Deal [COM(2019) 640 final] A Farm to Fork Strategy [COM(2020) 381 final] A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 [COM(2021) 345 final] Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 [COM(2020) 380 final] The Nature Restoration Law Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN Framework Convention on Climate Change • The Paris Protocol – A blueprint for tackling global climate change beyond 2020 [COM/2015/081 final] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora [92/43/EEC] • Directive on the conservation of wild birds [2009/147/EC] • Green Infrastructure — Enhancing Europe’s Natural Capital [COM/2013/0249 final] • Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans [SWD(2020) 223 final] • Regulation on Invasive Alien Species [(EU) 1143/2014]
Specific to Topic 3.1 Marine and coastal environment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN Convention on the Law of the Sea • UN Resolution on Single-Use Plastics • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8th Environment Action Programme • The Common Fisheries Policy [Regulation (EU) no. 1380/2013 of 11 December 2013] • EU Action Plan: Protecting and restoring marine ecosystems for sustainable and resilient fisheries • Directive as regards reducing the consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags [(EU) 2015/720] • Directive on establishing a framework for maritime spatial planning [2014/89/EU] • Directive on Nitrates [91/676/EEC] • Directive on port reception facilities for the delivery of waste from ships [(EU) 2019/883] • Directive on quality of water intended for human consumption [(EU) 2020/2184] • Directive on Urban Waste Water Treatment [(EU) 91/271/EEC] • Directive on Waste Framework [(EU) 2008/98/EC] • EU Action Plan: Towards Zero Pollution for Air, Water and Soil

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<p>[COM(2021) 400 final]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Alien Species Information Network (EASIN) • European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy [SWD(2018) 16 final] • Forging a climate-resilient Europe - the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change [COM(2021) 82 final] • Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) [(EU) 2002/413/CE] • Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) [Directive 2008/56/EC] • Recovery and Resilience Facility [Document 02021R0241-20230301] • Regulation as regards introducing new environmental economic accounts modules (Natural capital accounting) [(EU) No 691/2011] • The European Green Deal [COM (2019) 640 final] • Water Framework Directive (WFD) [Directive 2000/60/EC] • New approach for a Sustainable Blue Economy in the EU [COM/2021/240 final] • Council conclusions on a sustainable blue economy acknowledging blue corridors [Council conclusions, May 2021, 9153/21]
Specific to Topic 3.2 Transnational terrestrial habitats and biodiversity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora [CITES CoP19] • The Ramsar Convention • UNESCO World Heritage Convention • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European Green Deal [COM(2019) 640 final] • Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA) • EU Environment Partnership Programme for Accession (EPPA) • Regulation as regards introducing new environmental economic accounts modules (Natural capital accounting) [(EU) No

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<p>691/2011]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulation on the European Environment Agency and the European Environment Information and Observation Network [(EC) No 401/2009]
Pillar 4	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European Green Deal [COM (2019) 640 final] • Sustainable Blue Economy [COM(2021) 240 final] • A Farm to Fork Strategy [COM(2020) 381 final] • A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 [COM(2021) 345 final] • Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 [COM(2020) 380 final] • The Nature Restoration Law • Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)
Specific to Topic 4.1 Facilitating digital and green transition of the tourism and cultural heritage offer	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNESCO World Heritage Convention • EuroVelo: the European cycle route network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A European Strategy for more Growth and Jobs in Coastal and Maritime Tourism [COM/2014/086 final] • European Agenda for Tourism 2030 - Council conclusions (adopted on 01/12/2022) • National tourism strategies of EUSAIR participating countries • Resolution establishing the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes [CM/Res(2013)66] • Resolution on establishing the EU strategy for sustainable tourism [2020/2038(INI)] • Resolution on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<p>Relations [2022/2047(INI)]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition Pathway for Tourism, European Commission [DG GROW] • New European Agenda for Culture [COM/2018/267 final] and national cultural strategies • Digital Services Act [Directive 2000/31/EC and Regulation (EU) 2022/2065] • Creative Tourism Network (CTN) • Decision on establishing the Union action for the European Capitals of Culture for the years 2020 to 2033 [No 445/2014/EU] • European Capital and Green Pioneer of Smart Tourism • European Creative Hubs Network: A New European Agenda for Culture [SWD(2018) 167 final] • European Cultural Tourism Network (ECTN)
Specific to Topic 4.2 Preparing for the future: knowledge, skills and management	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EuroVelo: the European cycle route network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Agenda for Tourism 2030 - Council conclusions (adopted on 01/12/2022) • National tourism strategies of EUSAIR participating countries • Resolution establishing the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes [CM/Res(2013)66] • Resolution on establishing an EU strategy for sustainable tourism [2020/2038(INI)] • Resolution on the implementation of the New European Agenda for Culture and the EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations [2022/2047(INI)] • Transition Pathway for Tourism, European Commission [DG GROW] • New European Agenda for Culture [COM/2018/267 final] and

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	national cultural strategies
Specific to Topic 4.3 Greening of Tourism products and services	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WTO policy framework on Origin Products UNESCO World Heritage Convention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> European Agenda for Tourism 2030 - Council conclusions (adopted on 01/12/2022) Resolution on establishing the EU strategy for sustainable tourism [2020/2038(INI)] Transition Pathway for Tourism, European Commission [DG GROW] Transition Pathway for Agri-food, European Commission [DG GROW] Digital Services Act [Directive 2000/31/EC and Regulation (EU) 2022/2065] EC SWD (2023) 263 Co-creation of a transition pathway for a more resilient, sustainable and digital agrifood ecosystem
Pillar 5	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UN Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 [COM(2021) 345 final] The European Pillar of Social Rights [Document 52017DC0250] and European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan [COM/2021/102 final]
Specific to Topic 5.2 Youth engagement and employment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (09/2023) document "The Transformative Power of Education: Universal Values and Civic Renewal" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manifesto for Youth by Youth to Shape European Cooperation Policy The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 [Document 42018Y1218(01)] Youth Guarantee [2020/C 372/01]

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ALMA (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) [(EU) 2022/2175] • European Alliance for Apprenticeship (EAfA) • European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeship (2018/C 153/01) • Youth Employment Support Package • Quality Framework for Traineeships (Council Recommendation 10/03/2014) • Recommendation of establishing a European Child Guarantee [(EU) 2021/1004] • Regulation on establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport [(EU) 2021/817] • Regulation on establishing the European Solidarity Corps Programme [(EU) 2021/888] • Regulation on establishing the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps [(EU) No 375/2014] • European care strategy [COM(2022) 440 final]
Specific to Topic 5.3 Promoting skills acquisition for future labour markets	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (09/2023) document “The Transformative Power of Education: Universal Values and Civic Renewal” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building an economy that works for people: an action plan for the social economy [SWD(2021) 373 final] • European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience [COM(2020) 274 final] • Harnessing talent in Europe’s regions [COM/2023/32 final] • Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults [2016/C 484/01] • Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability [COM(2021) 770 final] • Recommendation on individual learning accounts [COM(2021) 773 final]

Relevant global policies include:	Relevant EU policies include:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regulation establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) [(EU) 2021/1057] • Regulation on establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport [(EU) 2021/817] • Strengthening Innovation in Europe's Regions: Strategies for resilient, inclusive and sustainable growth [COM(2017) 376 final] • Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence Programme (Horizon Europe) • Europe fit for Digital Age
Specific to Topic 5.4 Equal opportunities in the labour market	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Pay Transparency Directive [Directive (EU) 2023/970] • EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages [Directive (EU) 2022/2041] • EU Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions [Directive (EU) 2019/1152] • EU Legal Framework on Labour Mobility • EU Legal Framework on Labour Migration, particularly Seasonal Workers • EC Communication on decent work [COM(2022) 66 final]
Specific to Topic 5.5 Social Innovations	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda towards sustainable Europe by 2030 • Green paper on ageing • Building an economy that works for people: an action plan for the social economy [COM(2021) 778 final] • A Europe fit for the digital age

Annex 2 - Overview of the most relevant negotiating chapters for Cohesion Policy

The selected related negotiating chapters are listed below in accordance with the new enlargement methodology that clusters the negotiating chapters thematically.

Cluster	Related Chapters of the Acquis	Summary
Fundamentals	Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights	EU policies in the area of judiciary and fundamental rights aim to maintain and further develop the Union as an area of freedom, security and justice. The establishment of an independent and efficient judiciary is of paramount importance. Impartiality, integrity and a high standard of adjudication by the courts are essential for safeguarding the rule of law. A solid legal framework and reliable institutions are required to underpin a coherent policy of prevention and deterrence of corruption. Member States must ensure respect for fundamental rights and EU citizens' rights, as guaranteed by the acquis and by the Fundamental Rights Charter.
Fundamentals	Chapter 5 - Public Procurement	EU rules ensure that public procurement of goods, services and works in any Member State is transparent and open to all EU companies on the basis of non-discrimination and equal treatment.
Fundamentals	Chapter 18 – Statistics	EU rules require that Member States are able to produce good quality statistics in line with the principles of the European statistics Code of Practice and based on professional independence, impartiality, reliability, transparency and confidentiality. Common rules are provided for the methodology, production and dissemination of statistical information.
Fundamentals	Chapter 32 - Financial Control	The EU promotes the reform of national governance systems to improve managerial accountability, sound financial management of income and expenditure, and external audit of public funds. The financial control rules further protect the EU's financial interests against fraud in the management of EU funds and the Euro against counterfeiting.
Internal market	Chapter 2 – Freedom of Movement of Workers	Citizens of one Member State have the right to work in another Member State and must be given the same working and social conditions as other workers.
Internal market	Chapter 8 – Competition Policy	EU rules protect free competition. They include antitrust rules against restrictive agreements between companies and abuse of dominant position, and also include rules on concentrations between companies which would significantly impede competition. EU rules also set out a system of State aid control. Governments are only allowed to grant State aid if restrictive conditions are met, with a view to preventing distortion of competition.
Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	Chapter 14 - Transport	The EU has common rules for technical and safety standards, security, social standards, State aid and market liberalisation in road transport, railways, inland waterways, combined transport, aviation and maritime transport
Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	Chapter 15 – Energy	EU energy policy covers energy supply, infrastructure, the internal energy market, consumers, renewable energy, energy efficiency, nuclear energy and nuclear safety, and radiation protection.

Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	Chapter 21 - Trans-European Networks	The EU promotes trans-European networks (TENs) in the areas of transport, telecommunications and energy to strengthen the internal market and contribute to growth and employment.
Green agenda and sustainable connectivity	Chapter 27 – Environment and Climate Change	The EU promotes strong climate action, sustainable development and protection of the environment. EU law contains provisions addressing climate change, water and air quality, waste management, nature protection, industrial pollution, chemicals, noise and civil protection.

The interconnections between the Chapters are particularly significant in terms of Regional Policy. The ten chapters identified are part of three Clusters. Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, which also covers the areas of economic criteria, functioning of democratic institutions and public administration reform, as well as four chapters: 5, 18, 23 and 32. Furthermore, Cluster 2 on Internal Market combines two chapters: Chapter 2 – Freedom of Movement of Workers and Chapter 8 - Competition Policy, while Cluster 4 – Green Agenda & Sustainable Connectivity includes chapters 12, 15, 21 and 27 as the most important sectoral policies for cohesion policy.

Annex 3 - Indicative list of relevant funding sources and the embedding principle

By design, macro-regional strategies (MRS) such as the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) do not have their own funding. Successful implementation of a Strategy therefore depends on the one hand directly on its absorption and generation of EU, national, regional and other public and private funds. On the other hand, MRS comprise a variety of complex thematic policy fields, which means that in the implementation process, it is vital to align and streamline EUSAIR Pillars and Topics and to create synergies with other instruments and funding sources to secure a sound implementation of the goals set.

The Strategy covers many fields – from business start-ups to transport links, climate action to green multifunctionality... and much more. The Strategy is therefore a one-stop shop for news, stories, funding opportunities, and related information on cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans.

Indicative list of EU funds accessible to EU Member States only:

- ERDF & CF
- Interreg
- RRF
- Just Transition Fund
- ESF+
- EAFRD
- EMFAF

Indicative list of EU funds accessible to EU candidate countries and potential candidates, in cooperation with EU Member States:

- Interreg IPA
- LIFE
- Horizon Europe
- Digital Europe
- Erasmus +
- Creative Europe
- European Solidarity Corps

Indicative list of EU funds accessible to EU candidate countries and potential candidates:

- IPA
- IPARD
- IPA-IPA CBC
- Initiative for coal regions in transition in the Western Balkans and Ukraine
- Erasmus +
- Creative Europe
- European Solidarity Corps

The Strategy also aims at stimulating an inclusive financial dialogue with financial vehicles like the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), banks like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) or the European Investment Bank (EIB), development agencies, etc.

Annex 4 – Stakeholders

Pillar	1			2					3		4			5			
Topic	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	3.1	3.2	4.1	4.2	4.3	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.5
Relevant EU and other funds managing authorities.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Relevant IPA management and control systems' bodies, including National IPA Coordinators and IPARD Agencies	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Relevant official bodies in charge of human and minority rights																x	
Regional and National Environmental Protection Agencies									x	x							
Authorities in charge of Protected Areas Management (local, regional, subregional level)		x	x						x	x							
Local and regional authorities	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
Regional Administrations																x	
Local and regional authorities in charge of environment, biodiversity and nature protection									x	x	x	x					
Local and regional transport authorities of metropolitan and urban areas						x											
Urban and regional planners in metropolitan and urban areas						x											
Local energy agencies networks							x										
Local and regional tourism offices and development agencies		x	x								x	x	x				
Local, regional and national tourism boards and agrifood boards											x	x	x				
Local and regional fisheries management organisations, such as the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM)		x															
EATIP and its mirror platforms in the Adriatic Ionian Region Sector-specific advisory bodies Initiatives on RDI in the field of blue economy and other CSAs (ex. BlueMed, Blue Mission MED)		x	x														
International organisations and treaties, such as the Barcelona Convention through its Regional Action Centres, ACCOBAMS, Bern Convention, etc			x														
Trans-European Networks – Transport (TEN-T) stakeholders					x												
Transport Community					x												
Central and South Eastern Europe Energy Connectivity (CESEC) High-Level Working Group								x									
Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)								x									
Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM)							x										

Pillar	1			2					3		4			5			
Topic	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	3.1	3.2	4.1	4.2	4.3	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.5
Energy Community (EnC)							x	x									
Energy Community Distribution System Operators in Electricity (ECDSO-E)								x									
European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity (ENTSO-E)								x									
European Network of Transmission System Operators for Gas (ENTSO-G)								x									
Technical Assistance to Connectivity in the Western Balkans (CONNECTA)								x									
International Energy Agency (IEA)							x	x									
International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)							x	x									
Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators (ACER)							x	x									
National regulatory agencies							x										
European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA)							x	x	x	x							
European Federation of Agencies and Regions for Energy and Environment (FEDARENE)							x										
European Labour Authority (ELA)																x	
Airports authorities					x												
Port authorities					x												
Road authorities					x												
Railway infrastructure managers and railway undertakings					x												
Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAS)									x								
Multilateral Environmental Agencies (MEAS)										x							
Non-governmental organizations	x								x	x	x	x			x		
Social Partners and civil society organisations															x	x	x
Gender equality organisations																x	
Non-governmental organisations in the field of environment, biodiversity and nature protection		x	x						x	x	x	x	x				
Non-governmental organisations in the field of tourism, culture, natural protection and heritage													x				
Regional Fisheries Management Organizations									x								

Pillar	1			2					3		4			5			
Topic	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	3.1	3.2	4.1	4.2	4.3	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.5
Regional Sea Conventions									x								
Research institutes, academia and scientific organisations	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x				x
Universities and educational institutions, including schools	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Training institutions															x		
Scientific institutions															x		
International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (ex. CIHEAM)	x	x	x	x					x	x	x	x	x	x	x		
International Development and Cooperation									x		x	x					
Fisheries and Marine Management	x								x								
Ministries of Culture and Tourism	x										x	x	x				
Ministries of the Economy	x																
Ministries of Maritime Affairs	x	x	x	x													
Ministries of Universities, Research and Education	x	x	x												x		
Ministries of Science and Technology	x	x	x														
Ministries of SMEs	x																
Ministries of Agriculture		x	x										x				
Ministries for Rural Development and Food	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ministries of Forestry		x	x														
Ministries of Fisheries and Aquaculture	x	x	x														
Ministries for the Environment	x	x	x														
Ministries of Transport and Infrastructure		x	x	x	x	x											
Ministries of Labour / Employment														x	x	x	
Labour Inspectorates																x	
Civil protection and disaster control authorities				x	x												
Planning Authorities	x			x													
Port Authorities	x			x													

Pillar	1			2					3		4			5			
Topic	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	3.1	3.2	4.1	4.2	4.3	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.5
Port Users				x													
Local and private energy communities							x			x							
Rural Communities and LAGs, Fisheries Local Action Groups (FLAGs)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Business associations, SME associations, and clusters in the field of “blue sustainable economy”			x														
Chambers of Commerce															x		
Business association, Chambers of Commerce, SME associations, and clusters in the field of transport					x												
Business association, Chambers of Commerce, SME associations, and clusters in the field of tourism, and cultural and creative industries	x	x	x								x	x	x				
Local environmental associations (e.g. Friends of the Earth)							x	x									
Agricultural Associations and Associations of Agricultural Cooperatives and groups of growers									x				x				
REScoop.eu (European Federation of Citizen Energy Cooperatives)							x										
National Associations for Renewable Energy Sources and Energy Efficiency							x										
National energy RDI agencies							x										
Consumers Associations													x				
Public transport passenger associations						x											
Cycling Associations and organizations,						x											
Association of European Regions for Products of Origin (AREPO)													x				
Agrofood Partnerships and clusters in the Supply chain													x				
Business support organisations, innovation agencies/centres and technology parks	x																
SMEs and large companies in the fish value chain (also cooperatives and consortia)		x	x														
SMEs and large companies in the field of shipping and freight transport				x	x	x											
Multimodal operators				x	x												
Public transport operators					x	x											
Organisations in charge of smart specialisation strategies	x																

Pillar	1			2					3		4			5			
Topic	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	3.1	3.2	4.1	4.2	4.3	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.5
Social and Solidarity economy entities													x				
Destination management organisations (DMOs) at national, regional and local level											x	x	x				
International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUNC)											x	x	x				
OECD											x	x					
Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)							x	x									
UN Conference of the Parties of the Framework Convention on Climate Change							x		x	x							
United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)							x	x									
UNESCO											x	x					
UNDP											x	x	x				
UNWTO											x	x					
UN Tourism (UNFAO)													x				
Projects, networks, clusters in Horizon EU and the EIT	x	x															
Projects funded by the Horizon EU Mission 'Restore our Ocean and waters by 2030' and the new Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership co-founded by the EU Commission under cluster 6 of Horizon Europe			x														
Initiatives on RDI in the field of blue economy (ex. BlueMed, Blue Mission MED)	x																
Association of European Border Regions Young Leaders														x			
Erasmus Student Network (ESN)														x			
Interreg Volunteer Youth (IVY)														x			
EUSAIR POPRI network of technology parks														x			
Young European Ambassadors (YEAs)														x			
The European Youth Forum														x			
Youth associations														x			
Youth Regional Network (YRN)														x			
Public employment services (PES)														x	x	x	x
National / regional youth workers and youth workers association														x	x		

Pillar	1			2					3		4			5			
Topic	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	2.3	2.4	2.5	3.1	3.2	4.1	4.2	4.3	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.5
European Investment Bank (EIB)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Adriatic and Ionian Interregional Group at the Committee of the Regions	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Covenant of Mayors	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Cities (FAIC)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce (Forum AIC)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Association of Adriatic and Ionian Universities (UniAdriion)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x