The revision of the Atlantic Action Plan
Feedback on the Commission’s proposal

Context:

The Atlantic Strategy is the first EU Maritime Strategy. It involves the five Atlantic Member States (Portugal, Spain, France, the United Kingdom and Ireland) and Atlantic stakeholders. The Strategy was released by the European Commission in 2011 and an Action Plan was adopted by the Council in 2013. An “Atlantic Strategy Group (ASG)” currently steers the Strategy. It is composed of the five Member States, the European Commission (DG MARE and DG REGIO mainly but also DG Research and others), the Committee of the Regions (CoR), and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). The CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission is member of this ASG to represent Atlantic Regions.

An evaluation of the implementation of the Atlantic Action Plan (AAP) was conducted in 2017 by the European Commission. The final document, to which the CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission (AAC) contributed, was released as a European Commission Staff Working Document in February 2018. It underlines some limits in the AAP implementation. As a result, and following suggestions from the AAC, the Atlantic Strategy Group decided to consult stakeholders on proposals to improve the AAP.

National workshops were held during the second semester of 2018. In the meantime, the AAC developed its Political Declaration on the Revision of the Atlantic Action Plan in June 2019. In July 2020 the Commission released a Communication which took stock of our main messages. The new Action Plan is now discussed in the European Parliament notably in REGI Committee (Mr Younous Omarjee is Rapporteur). Paula Fernandez, Vice-President of Cantabria has also been appointed as the Rapporteur for the Committee of the Regions on this issue.

The following analysis will aim at screening what has been improved and the avenues of work to feed into the work of the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament.
Key comments on the new Atlantic Action Plan 2.0

The new AAP 2.0 gives satisfaction both in terms of the priorities chosen and the governance model proposed. However, some issues still need particular attention. Further to its Atlantic Arc Commission Political Declaration voted in June 2019, this paper attempts to analyse the possible need for improvements and avenues of work to formalise a governance model and financial schemes which correspond to the need of the Atlantic regions. It aims at nurturing the discussion between regions in the framework of the Atlantic Arc Commission hub meetings.

I. GOVERNANCE OF THE ATLANTIC STRATEGY

1) The Atlantic Strategy Committee

Efforts have been made to formalise the governance of the Atlantic Strategy which will bring more transparency to the procedure of work and mandate of standing members.

The Atlantic Strategy is a Sea Basin Strategy steered by:

- A political coordination level in the hands of the participating countries’ designated Ministers responsible for maritime affairs (currently Ireland, France, Spain, Portugal). The United Kingdom is no longer a member of the Atlantic Strategy. They should decide on the general orientation and to expand membership of the Atlantic strategy to any interested State. The Presidency is an annual rotating presidency from one Member State to another. In 2020 it is led by France. It will be led by Ireland in 2021.

- An operational coordination level steered by the “Atlantic Strategy Committee” (ASC). The ASC is composed of representatives of four Atlantic Member States as well as representatives from EU institutions. DG MARE is leading the work of the European Commission within the ASC, DG REGIO participates regularly in the ASC. The CPMR’s Atlantic Arc Commission is adviser to the ASC. National delegations are allowed to bring their regions around the table, and according to their institutional framework. The Atlantic Strategy Committee periodically reviews and updates the Action Plan and proposes/approves flagship actions, and reports to the participating countries’ designated Ministers responsible for maritime affairs to ensure the political coordination.

From the perspective of the AAC, the role of regions in the Governance of the Atlantic Strategy is a clear improvement compared to the previous Atlantic Action Plan. They can stand in the Atlantic Strategy Committee via the role of Adviser of the Atlantic Arc Commission Secretariat. They can be part of national delegations. However, so far, France has included continental regions in the meetings.

Regions can also be pillar coordinators or propose representatives to work in the Task Force around each pillar coordinator. The role of regions in the pillar coordination is also of paramount importance to enable co-ownership on the AAP and a greater streamlining of funding between regional funds and the objectives of the strategy.

Although some references are made to ‘Atlantic islands’ in the Communication of the European Commission, more clarity should be brought with regards the participation of the Atlantic islands and outermost regions. The ASC should also monitor the possible future participation of the UK and its devolved powers in a post-Brexit context.

The model of the Alpine strategy could further nurture the reflections on the role of regions in the governance structure.

2) Pillar Coordination

Pillar Coordinators aim at coordinating one priority of the Action Plan. They should be helped with a small Task Force of experts, guaranteeing the transnational dimension of activities planned and developed under each pillar. On 25 September, Member States had a first discussion on the nomination of pillar coordinators and composition of the Task Force.
Pilar I (Ports)
- Potential coordinator: IMDO (IE)
- Potential co-coordinator: Portugal
- Potential Task Force: Ms Rosita Mahony, Senior Economic Development Officer, Donegal County Council (CPMR)

Pillar II (Blue skills)
- Potential coordinator: Ciencia Viva (PT)
- Potential co-coordinator: Ms Stéphanie Bordenave-Juchereau, Associate Professor and Director of the Biotechnology Masters’ Degree, University of La Rochelle (FR and CPMR)
- Potential Task Force: Ireland, Spain

Pillar III (EMR)
- Potential coordinator: Mr Olatz Ajuria from the Basque Country Agency (CPMR and Spain)
- Potential co-coordinator: tbc
- Potential Task Force: France, Ireland

Pillar IV (Healthy Oceans)
- Potential coordinator: Pole Mer Bretagne Atlantique (France)
- Potential co-coordinator: tbc
- Potential Task Force members: Ireland and CPMR (Marcos Nogueira, Alentejo Region)

From the perspective of the AAC, we can positively acknowledge that our proposals have been accepted, and that Member States’ proposals are experts with a place-based profile. The CPMR Atlantic Arc Secretariat should be able to follow all the Task Force work to be able to support the AAC regions’ involvement and coordinate with its own Working Groups.

3) The Assistance Mechanism and National Hubs

The Assistance Mechanism has been renewed and is now composed of PwC Portugal, PwC Greece and PwC Luxembourg as well as Kantor. There are 5 work packages which will continue to perform awareness raising and communication activities. It will positively include in its future tasks the development of a monitoring tool for the evaluation of the implementation of the new AAP as well as an “Expert support” activity to support Pillar Coordinators.

On the National Contact points, bilateral discussions were held with Member States to gather their views on possible candidates for the National Hubs. A shortlist of final candidates was proposed in October. By the end of the October-November, the finalisation of the National Hub selection process is expected after final feedback is received from the member states.

From an AAC perspective, the National Hubs and the Assistance Mechanism should have a territorial dimension and their role clearly defined. Insufficiencies detected in the past, such as the absence of regular contacts between national hubs and the Regions should be overcome.

II. FINANCING THE ATLANTIC STRATEGY

No funding has been earmarked in the EU budget for the Atlantic Action Plan. The plan will mainly rely on any EU and national funds and financing instruments relevant to the goals and actions that can be mobilised. The timing of the Action Plan is designed to inspire Managing Authorities from EU Member States and coastal regions when they are formulating their partnership agreements and programmes which are planned to be finalised before the end of 2020. Looking to the next programming period (2021-2027), the Communication explores what finance is needed to ensure a successful implementation of the identified actions, including looking at the directly managed funding programmes and programmes of the European Investment Bank.

Besides, the Common Provision Regulation sets a common objective to ensure that 75% of INTERREG transnational programmes go to the priorities of the relevant sea-basin and macro-region. Reference to a coordination with Managing Authorities of Cohesion Policy programmes has been made in the regulation.

From an AAC perspectives, the further alignment of funding opportunities is positive. Deriving from these legal obligations, new working methods should be developed:
- between DG REGIO and the ASC;
- between the ASC and managing authorities;
- Between the ASG and the relevant INTERREG programmes;
- Between DG MARE/DG REGIO and other relevant DGs (ENER, TRAN, EMPL, etc.) for the development of EU Calls dedicate to the objectives of the Strategy;
- Between the ASC and the EU Investment Bank.

The Atlantic Strategy should also benefit from the NextGeneration EU funding possibilities. This could only be achieved by including regions in the development of national recovery plans, as set by the new Recovery and Resilience Facility.

The possible inclusion of the UK and UK regions in the future governance should prompt Member States to have a reflection, not only on streamlining EU funding to the priorities of the Atlantic Action Plan but also on a coordination of national and regional funding opportunities.

III. PRIORITIES OF THE ATLANTIC STRATEGY

The Plan contains four overarching thematic pillars:
- Ports as gateway and hubs for the blue economy;
- Blue skills of the future and ocean literacy;
- Marine renewable energy;
- Healthy ocean and resilient coast.

Each pillar set specific goals and a proposal for actions. The priorities are linked with current short term issues such as the recovery from COVID, and more long-term challenges such as the connection of Ireland to the continent, the Green transition, and the development of renewable energies. The scope of the priorities has been reduced to ensure the implementation of the Action Plan and ensure that it acts as a leverage of funding. Ports have been given particular attention, as they constitute a strategic area gathering different blue economy activities.

From an AAC perspective, it is positive to see that the scope of the priorities has been reduced to ensure the development of concrete actions directly enhanced by the AAP. Cross-cutting priorities such as priority 1, 3 and 4 should include specific attention to those sectors which lack a mention but are key sectors for regions (eg. fisheries and aquaculture or tourism). It is positive to see that the AAP suggests the development of flagship projects for the Atlantic, a long-standing call from the AAC. However, it requests that the definition of flagship projects is done together with the regional authorities. In line with the new AAC political orientation, further coordination of regional Smart Specialisations could constitute a basis for future flagship projects and a more territorial dimension could be connected to the maritime priorities, as do Macro-Regions.