The Added Value of the Atlantic Macro-Region

Goals and Summary

The goal of this paper is to provide you with some background information on the project for the creation of an Atlantic Macro-Region, as promoted by the Atlantic Arc Commission. The note follows on from the meeting held on 15 March between representatives of the Atlantic Arc Commission and advisors to the French Secretary of State for European Affairs, Mr Clément Beaune, with the aim of creating an Atlantic Macro-Region.

To recap, the Atlantic Arc Commission voted in December 2020 for a Political Declaration asking the Council to issue a mandate to the European Commission to create an Atlantic Macro-Region.

It has worked hand in hand with the European Parliament, which supports this proposal in its report “Towards a new approach to the Strategy for the Atlantic” voted in September 2021, as well as with the Atlantic Member States, which have met on several occasions, notably in the context of the General Assembly in June 2021. Following these contacts, the French, Spanish and Portuguese Secretaries of State agreed to jointly analyse the benefits of the Atlantic Macro-Region, in a Trilateral Declaration agreed on 5 November 2021.

On the basis of these developments, this technical note aims to recall and detail the added value of a macro-region with regard to the current Atlantic Maritime Strategy. It also aims to give details of the scope and governance desired by the CPMR member regions.

In summary, the Atlantic Macro-Region should enable:
(1) a more global vision of Atlantic territorial development, combining the challenges of the sea with those of the land;
(2) improved governance so that regions can be fully involved in the strategic thinking of the strategy;
(3) better streamlining of funding towards macro-regional objectives, in particular ERDF funding and EU funding programmes managed centrally by the Commission, such as Horizon Europe or the European Interconnection Facility.
1. **Definition of a Macro-Region:**

A Macro-Region is a cross-border area bringing together several European countries or regions around shared challenges, supported by the EU in the framework of a jointly defined territorial strategy. This strategy aims to motivate initiatives and projects that contribute to a balanced development of the macro-regional territory. **A Macro-Region has no dedicated EU funds and no specific structure or legal status.** Like the Atlantic Maritime Strategy, it is intended to optimise the funding already available in each country, and to pool and synergise initiatives for better integration of the territory.

EU macro-regional strategies are initiated and requested through the European Council by the relevant Member States located in the same geographical area. After a request from the European Council, the strategies are developed and adopted by the European Commission.

There are currently 4 macro-regions in the EU (see Annex 1):

- The first Macro-Region to be created is the **Baltic Sea Macro-Region** (2009) which brings together 8 countries around 3 axes: protecting the marine environment, integrating and connecting regions and developing common growth;

- The second is the **Danube Macro-Region** (2010) which brings together 14 countries and aims to create synergies and improve coordination of local policies and initiatives. The environment and transport form the main focus of this strategy;

- The **Adriatic and Ionian Macro-Region** (2014) which brings together 9 EU countries and 5 non-EU countries on 3 main issues: cooperation in sectors of maritime economy, environmental protection and completion of interconnections. It was initially a basin strategy which then evolved into a macro-regional strategy.

- The **Alpine Macro-Region** (2015) which brings together 5 states, including France, around 3 areas: Fair access to employment based on the region’s high level of competitiveness, sustainable internal and external accessibility, and a more inclusive environmental framework with renewable and reliable energy solutions for the future. The Regions co-chair the Alpine Macro-Region alongside the States involved.
The added value of macro-regional strategies is characterised by their cross-sectoral approach, transnational dimension and contribution to improved multi-level governance. However, this ambitious concept will need time to consolidate and bear fruit.

2. Current state of affairs: the Atlantic Maritime Strategy

Currently, the Atlantic sea basin has a Strategy that was adopted by the European Commission in 2011. This strategy brings together France, Spain, Portugal and Ireland with the aim of promoting cooperation to develop the maritime economy of the area.

The European Commission adopted the new AMS Action Plan on 23 July 2020. The ambition of this plan is to promote a sustainable blue economy and the Green Deal for Europe. This action plan is based on 4 axes: Atlantic ports, blue skills, protection of the coasts and renewable marine energy.

Responsibility for the governance of the Atlantic Maritime Strategy (AMS) lies with the Atlantic Strategy Group (ASG), which is composed of representatives of the ministries of the four European Atlantic States at technical level and DG MARE. It hosts the Secretariat of the CPMR Atlantic Arc Commission as associate members. Spain has chaired this group since 1 January 2022 and is responsible for decision-making, operational coordination and the implementation of the action plan. It is supported in its role by a DG MARE Assistance Mechanism (contractor).

The action plan has therefore been updated to align with the European priorities of the Green Pact as well as to respond to the effects of the current economic and health crisis. It also aims to breathe new life into the original plan, which was launched in 2013.

But there are however several limitations, linked to the very nature of Basin Strategies:

- Basin strategies do not have strong political leadership, which would enable them to coordinate reflection on structuring projects for the Atlantic seaboard, as they are still managed at a technical level;
- Basin strategies focus on maritime issues, excluding more territorial issues that are essential to take into account for the sustainable development of the Atlantic territories, but also respecting the oceans;
- Basin strategies benefit from the support of DG MARE and EMFF/EMFAF for the implementation of its objectives, but EMFF/EMFAF remains a European fund with a limited budget which does not really allow the implementation of structuring projects for the coastline.

Although the new Action Plan is an improvement on the Atlantic Strategy initially created in 2013, the “Basin Strategy” DNA of the Atlantic Strategy does not permit the Action Plan to be a real lever for coordination and political ambitions for the Atlantic area. The Atlantic Macro-Region is therefore intended to be complementary to the steps taken in the framework of the AMS, while giving it political added value. This is where the main challenge of the AAC approach lies, namely its benefit in relation to what already exists.

3. The challenges of setting up an Atlantic Macro-Region

Essentially, such a Macro-Region would enable the common challenges of the Atlantic seaboard regions to be tackled more effectively and, in particular, to overcome the difficulties caused by Brexit and the Covid-19 epidemic. It would increase cooperation between the Atlantic regions and would be a tool for better capturing European funds by identifying emblematic and structuring projects for the Atlantic. Thanks to more structured governance, it would allow improved alignment with existing regional, national and European programmes, and in particular with directly managed (CEF, Horizon, EMFF, etc.) and indirectly managed (INTERREG Atlantic Area, ERDF operational programmes) EU programmes.

The Macro-Region can indeed act as a means of intensifying the political dimension of this cooperation, and as a real lever for action on the ground but also with regard to European political developments that impact the Atlantic area, which is what the AMS lacks at present. This is particularly the case regarding the deployment of marine renewable energies, where the Atlantic Strategy is struggling to launch an acceleration of investments as set out in the European Commission’s Communication on Offshore Renewable Energies.
• **Funding:**

As the Macro-Regions do not have their own resources, their implementation depends on funding pooled from various sources. Therefore, their success or failure is linked to their ability to ensure that EU, national, regional and other funds are aligned with the priorities of the relevant strategy.

Nevertheless, European funds, and in particular the ERDF, are more closely aligned with the priorities of the macro-regions than is the case for the Basin Strategies. This is a consequence of the fact that DG REGIO steers the implementation of these macro-regions and sets up coordination tools such as the Forum of Managing Authorities or meetings between directors in charge of innovation in the regions, which allow for better inter-knowledge and the development of common projects. The INTERREG Atlantic Area programme can play a pivotal role in meeting the priorities, even if it has limited financial resources.

• **Governance and administrative capacity:**

The governance structures of the existing Macro-Regions are at 3 interdependent levels:

- **Political**: represented by foreign ministers or authorities in charge of EU funds. The regions also play an important role in the Alpine Macro-Region. They co-pilot the strategic orientation of the latter alongside the Member States. This model of governance allows for better ownership of the Strategy by the Regions and strengthens its capacity to be a real lever for promoting meaningful projects at a transnational, national and regional level. Following the model set up within the Alpine Macro-Region, the regions would have a place in a governance built on a bottom-up approach. This would ensure that they have their needs and priorities taken into account and that they are involved in the decision-making process. This would also allow them to increase their visibility. It is also important to give local actors a place in this type of governance. Major networks such as the Atlantic Cities may be involved.

- **Coordination**: this is carried out by the priority coordinators and national coordinators. They act as an interface between the policy level and the implementation level to
which they provide strategic guidance. Multi-level coordination mechanisms are being set up at national level. Regions can also take on this role.

- **Implementation**: thematic/policy or action steering groups are the day-to-day motors of the Macro-Region’s action plan. They report on the progress of the thematic objectives of the macro-region to higher levels of governance.

*NB: Setting up a Macro-Region implies the stronger involvement (resources, technical capacities, skills, effective decision-making capacity) of all its actors (including the regions).*

- **Themes:**

The Macro-Region embraces the priorities defined in a common way on a territory. It can include both maritime and territorial issues (Baltic, Adriatic-Ionian). In contrast, the Sea Basin Strategy focuses on the themes of the blue economy. While the Atlantic identity is strongly linked to the Ocean, the Macro-Region would make it possible to cover issues linked to these regions’ territorial development in a more general way, encompassing themes such as innovation in the agri-food sector, tourism or sustainable mobility, which are highly important sectors for the Atlantic regions.

4. **Perimeter of the Atlantic macro-region**

A Macro-Region would make it possible to better specify the geographical perimeter of the Atlantic area. It would include all the regions concerned by the INTERREG Atlantic Area programme, including in particular the Irish, French, Spanish and Portuguese regions of the Atlantic seaboard, as well as the outermost regions of the Atlantic.

Moreover, it would make it possible to better define relations with the Atlantic non-member states and give space to those states, regions and nations that wish to join. The macro-regional framework in this sense represents an undeniable added value since it provides a structured and high-level governance for the sustainable development of a given area and is not limited to bringing EU Member States closer together. It would thus
take into account issues related to the implementation of the Cooperation Agreement between the UK and the EU in this sea basin.