Proposal by the Atlantic Arc Commission
to the European Council of a mandate to the Commission
for an EU Atlantic Macro-Regional Strategy

Following an extensive debate at the core of the Atlantic Arc Commission (AAC) of the CPMR, the members of the Atlantic Arc Commission stress that:

- The Atlantic seaboard is lagging behind some other European regions in terms of development (GDP per capita). There is still much to be done in this region of Europe as regards other indicators, such as the unemployment rate, investment in R&D as a percentage of GDP, and education and training.

- Of the Atlantic States, Spain, France and Portugal are among the most affected by the COVID-19 crisis. It is for this reason that these States will receive very significant sums from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

- The Atlantic regions are also facing further economic crisis as a result of Brexit, which will add new external borders to those already in place. In fact, the sectors that will be adversely affected by Brexit are the same as those currently affected by public health measures introduced to combat COVID-19, namely: fishing, aquaculture, tourism, commerce, transport and industry, aeronautics and automation especially.

In this context, the Atlantic Arc Commission Regions recall that:

- The challenges of the green and blue recovery from COVID-19 and Brexit need to be addressed in a coordinated way at an Atlantic level. The ultimate objective of such coordination should be to promote sustainable economic development, in particular focusing on the Blue Economy in the Atlantic, through greater economic, social and territorial cohesion, without leaving anyone behind.

- The Atlantic Strategy is the framework for such coordination but needs to improve its action in the area.

- The Atlantic Action Plan 2.0 represents a real improvement, and the Atlantic Arc Commission Regions place lots of hope in the Plan as it draws some line for a greater coordination with regions both at strategic and implementation levels (see Atlantic Arc Commission technical analysis).

- However, the AAP 2.0 has to be completed in a context of COVID-19 crisis and Brexit: a more important political leadership; even more ambition to have the AAP 2.0 as a real tool for the recovery of the Atlantic area; more connection with more territorial challenges and the Atlantic regions RIS3; more inclusion of regions in the governance; the necessity to align regional, national and EU funds.
The Atlantic Arc Commission Regions highlight that the Macro-Region model has the potential to tackle the above-mentioned challenges:

✔ The concept of macro-regional strategy (MRS), has shown it could tackle these challenges by expanding cooperation and coordination between Regions and Member States and making better use of financial resources. Though a variety of Macro-Regions models exist, they have managed to develop good practices which should be acknowledged and transfer to other areas such as the Atlantic.

✔ The Alpine model has notably proven to ensure a greater political dimension to the strategy and a greater sense of ownership from regions to the strategy with a co-chair of the Strategy\(^1\), “not by bypassing the national level, but by acting at the same level in partnership”\(^2\). The full participation of its interested regions has enabled a real multi-level governance that could inspire the Atlantic.

✔ The Macro-Regions have proven to create closer coordination with the INTERREG programmes in the area and have worked to develop a greater alignment with ERDF mainstream programmes, (Embedding Workshop, network of Managing Authorities, participation of MRS representatives in the ESIF and INTERREG monitoring committees, coordination of calls for projects).

✔ With this specific setting, the Macro-Regions area also able to connect maritime issues with interconnected territorial challenges and different Smart Specialisation Strategies which are pivotal for the development of value chains in the territories, as exemplified by the BSR S3 Ecosystem platform. In the Atlantic, common RIS3 has been identified\(^3\): promotion of renewal energies, natural resource management, smart mobility and connectivity infrastructures, new health models based on Big Data and e-Health, innovation in the agri-food industry.

✔ The Macro-Regions will thus be better equipped to harness the potential of new tool under cohesion policy such as the Interregional Innovation Investment (I3) proposed for 2021-2027, with a budget of EUR 500 million, specifically geared toward contributing to industrial value chains based on regional RIS3 strategies at the European level.

✔ The Macro-regions may also be better equipped to ensure coordination between States and regions at a transnational level when it comes to coordinate recovery plans proposed under the Resilience and Recovery Facility.

✔ The Macro-Regions have also benefitted from a practical and operational macro-regional Territorial Monitoring Tool developed by the ESPON programme, evaluating the implementation and role of the MRS on the ground, a tool that the Atlantic Strategy is deprived of.

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\(^1\) The Minister of Cohesion of Territories as well as the Presidents of the three French regions participating in the EUSALP (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, Provence-AlpesCôte d’Azur, and Bourgogne-Franche-Comté) attended the kick-off event of the French Presidency (Lyon, February 2020). Source: report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, European Commission (2020)

\(^2\) European Commission Staff Working Document on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies (Sept 2020)

\(^3\) This analysis will be revised in view of Smart Specialization Strategies post 2020
Taking into account the demanding context in which we find ourselves, which demands coordinated responses not only to face challenges such as Brexit or the recovery from COVID-19, but also to implement measures in accordance with the European Green Deal or the European Digital Strategy, as well as adapt to and harness the innovations introduced in financing programmes for the next EU programming period 2021-2027, the Atlantic Arc Commission Regions:

✔ Recognise that, with the conclusions of 20 May 2019 on macro-regional strategies, the General Affairs Council: (12) INVITES the Commission as well as the countries and regions to build on the links between smart specialization strategies and clusters to better connect ecosystems and industrial and innovation policies within the framework of macro-regional strategies, and to explore and continue developing complementarities with sea-basin strategies; (17) REMAINS willing to consider any sound and mutually agreed initiative by Member States facing the same challenges in a given geographical area, aimed at establishing a new macro-regional strategy;

✔ Request that, during the Portuguese Presidency of the EU and, once the transitional period for the United Kingdom's exit from the EU has finished, the Atlantic member states call on the Council for a mandate to the European Commission to develop an Atlantic macro-regional strategy on the basis of the current Atlantic Sea-Basin Strategy to harness the positives effects of Macro-regions mentioned above. This initiative would promote sustainable and inclusive economic development through greater economic, social and territorial cohesion, taking into account the effects of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic on the Atlantic zone.

This Maritime Macro-Region should also bolster its maritime character and stimulate the innovation potential linked to the common areas identified in the RIS3, while promoting the connectivity development in the Atlantic territories. It should also, promote the connection and coordination with inland areas of the Atlantic Regions.

Its governance must likewise take account of the multi-level dimension and be inspired by the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, to ensure effective regional participation.

Finally, the Atlantic Macro-Region must promote transatlantic cooperation in the framework of the areas identified, with particular attention to the UK regions and nations and Atlantic islands and outermost regions. We believe that the UK and its nations could remain as a third country within a stable institutional cooperative framework favouring the maintenance of a permanent dialogue on matters of common interest. Cross-border Regions and other territories of Atlantic third countries may eventually join this Macro-Region.
The Atlantic Arc Commission is one of the six Geographical Commissions of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe, and its action, although specific to the requirements of its Member Regions, is part of this more general framework.

The Atlantic Arc Commission was established in 1989 in Faro (Algarve, Portugal). It covers five States (France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom) in a territory spreading from Andalucia to Scotland. With some 60 million inhabitants, it represents 12% of the European population. The presidency of the Atlantic Arc Commission is currently held by the Basque Government (Spain).