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## **Final Stakeholders Consultation EUSAIR Athens February 6th-7th 2014**

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On the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2014, the Final Stakeholders Conference on the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) took place in Athens, Greece at the premises of the Divani Caravan Hotel.

The event has been the final act of the consultation phase which began in September 2013, and has been a chance to discuss the form and contents of the EUSAIR together with all involved parties.

The Conference has been organized in two days, giving the chance to all parties to be involved in the discussion. The welcome addresses of the ceremony were delivered by Antonis Samaras, Prime Minister of Greece, Johannes Hahn, Commissioner for Regional Policy and Maria Damanaki, Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

During the first day, two Plenary Sessions have been organized. The first one was focused on the EUSAIR as a vehicle for growth and jobs, while the second one on the EUSAIR State of Play and future prospects. During the sessions, plenty of space was given to the public thank to some Q&A moments.

The Ministers and Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the eight countries that are part of the region have been involved into a political debate. The critical points raised during the discussion focused primarily on the available funds and on the administrative and governance challenges.

Regarding the financing, concern has been expressed from the public on where the resources will come from and how they will be allocated. In the EUSAIR documents made available by the Commission is stated that new resources will not be released exclusively for EUSAIR, but possible financing resources indicated by the respondents will be the following: EU Structural and Cohesion funds, resources under the umbrella of the already existing instruments addressed to both Member States and Candidate and Potential candidate countries i.e. Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), INTERREG, European Investment Bank (EIB), European Investment Fund (EIF), COSME, HORIZON 2020, LIFE and under the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF). Some of the EU officials present at the Conference stressed that the EU will also allocate funding and grants for special projects in the context of the EUSAIR, once implemented i.e. new research funds for each pillar considered.

A strong debate developed also regarding the structure of the EUSAIR governance. There isn't yet a specific path or design, but an overall agreement that stronger coordination among countries is needed. As Hitzler, Director of the DG Enlargement stated, no country or organization will have the leadership, only cooperation and inclusion will be the keys of the success of the Strategy. He forecasted that a record of the existing networks will be made by the Commission and Observers

will be created for each pillar. Finally, International Forum will be organized each year to gather stakeholders and to examine together the achievements and future steps.

During the second day, thematic workshops have been organized along the four priorities of the EUSAIR: “Blue growth”, “Connecting the Region”, “Environmental Quality” and “Sustainable Tourism” where all stakeholders personally contributed with opinions and proposals. All results of the consultation are published on the Commission website.

At the Closing session, Charlina Vitcheva, Director of the DG for Regional and Urban Policy, highlighted the most important added-values of the EUSAIR and its difference with the other European Macro-regions, namely the Baltic and the Danube one. The potentials of the EUSAIR lie on the following key points: its objectives are few and clearly defined since the beginning; it has a functional and operational approach; the launch of the strategy coincides with the beginning of the new Programming period 2014-2020; it will not generate further administrative burdens, but among its goals, intends to align and integrate two governmental approaches, the central one (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and local one (Region, Municipality) so that any change in the national government wouldn't negatively affect the networks and projects that the Strategy will generate. Last but not least, as the Athens Conference has proven, for the first time there is a high level political commitment.

During the four-year consultation process, the European Commission has made deep effort in order to carry on a bottom-up approach in the political process of defining the Strategy. The structure of the Athens Conference has been clear evidence that the effort paid because there has been a very active involvement of all layers of society living and working in the area. EU officials have stressed that the EU funds for 2014-2020 has been designed in order to be more flexible and accessible by the private sector and is exactly for this reason that civil society must continue to be involved in EUSAIR.

As a proceeding of the Athens Conference, the European Commission will draw up the final Action Plan for the EUSAIR, which alongside the Communication; will constitute the Strategy for the future implementation of the EUSAIR. The package is expected to be adopted in June, and an initial presentation has been scheduled at the General Affairs Council on June 24, under the Greek Presidency, prior to its adoption under the Italian Presidency in the autumn 2014.

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