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Further changes are possible until publication as  
The European Commission Staff Working Document*

## Executive summary

The Baltic Sea Region is among the most interconnected and integrated areas in Europe, as demonstrated by long-standing traditions of cooperation within multiple networks, organisations and formats. The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (the Strategy) provides a unique platform for cooperation and coordination for its member states, neighbouring countries and a wide range of stakeholders. It focuses on shared opportunities and challenges that can be addressed more effectively through coordinated regional action.

The Strategy's multi-level and cross-sectoral cooperation model remains the cornerstone of its success, serving as a key enabler for strengthening synergies, improving policy coherence and increasing the overall impact of the Strategy.

The current update responds to key challenges faced by the Baltic Sea Region, including a changing security environment, climate change, demographic shifts and the demands of the green and digital transitions. Most importantly, the updated Action Plan aims at strengthening the Baltic Sea Region's resilience in a comprehensive and holistic manner. The Action Plan reflects the EU's new strategic agenda for 2024–2029, prepares the Strategy for alignment with the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 and ensures continued contribution to the relevant United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Gender equality, meaningful youth participation, constructive cooperation with neighbouring countries and close coordination with other regional organisations and formats remain fundamental principles guiding the implementation of the Strategy.

The introduction of the impact pathway model marks a renewed emphasis on results-oriented implementation. This approach underlines the Strategy's mission—to deliver tangible impact and generate clear added value for the region and all its stakeholders.

The Strategy's three objectives—Save the Sea, Connect the Region and Increase Prosperity—remain valid and in force. These objectives are pursued through 14 thematic Policy Areas, within which the expected impact and Actions have been updated and made more focused. The governance framework of the Strategy remains unchanged, ensuring stability and continuity in implementation.

Strengthened planning, monitoring and evaluation guidelines now enable a more systematic measurement of the Strategy's results, impacts and overall added value. Furthermore, increased attention to communication and visibility aims to better demonstrate the Strategy's practical achievements and its contribution to a more secure, sustainable and prosperous Baltic Sea Region.

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# 1. The scope of the Action Plan

## 1.1. Background

The Baltic Sea Region has a long tradition of cooperation, as evidenced by multiple networks and organisations in the region. Based on that tradition, in 2009 the EU Member States in the region decided to start a new type of transnational cooperation. The EU Strategy for Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR, later on referred to as the Strategy) is the eldest of the four EU macro-regional strategies<sup>1</sup>.

The Strategy provides a unique platform for cooperation and coordination between its Member States (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden), including also with the neighbouring countries in the region where relevant and appropriate. It focuses on challenges and opportunities, which are more efficiently addressed when working in a coordinated manner within the region.

Over the years, the multi-level and cross-sectoral cooperation model of the Strategy has been successful in engaging a wide range of stakeholders to network and cooperate. It has strengthened their ownership and raised their engagement to tackle common challenges and seize common opportunities. The cooperation model itself adds value by connecting people, creating networks, improving coordination and enhancing synergies. The Council of the European Union recognised macro-regional strategies as important instruments for cooperation and mutual learning and highlighted their contribution to broader EU processes, including the Union's enlargement policy. The EU Council has also recognised the contribution of the Strategies to bridging the gap between local and regional actions, as well as European political priorities, in line with the objectives of cohesion policy and the place-based approach.<sup>2</sup>

Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine prompted a significant re-evaluation of the EU and regional strategic priorities and goals. The evolving security landscape underscores the importance of building long-term resilience through a holistic, society-wide approach. Strengthening cooperation between the Baltic Sea Region countries and Ukraine is also further developed within the Strategy.

The Strategy is accompanied by an Action Plan, a rolling document to be regularly revised or updated as necessary. The current update reflects the major challenges shaping the Baltic Sea Region: a rapidly evolving security environment and increasingly complex multi-hazard risks; accelerating climate change and persistent environmental pressures, demographic change, and the demands of the green and digital transitions. These developments require strengthened cross-border coordination and a coherent, region-wide approach to

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<sup>1</sup> Four EU macro-regional strategies have been adopted so far: EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR; 2009), EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR; 2010), EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR; 2014), EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP; 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Council of the European Union (2025). Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies - Council conclusions (16.09.2025), 12369/25, pp. 2-3

resilience, sustainability and competitiveness across all three objectives of the Strategy.

Furthermore, significant advancements in monitoring, evaluation, and strategic planning have shaped this update. The adoption of the impact pathway model enhances the clarity and effectiveness of the Strategy by linking policy objectives to concrete outputs, outcomes, and long-term impacts. This structured approach improves decision-making, ensures a stronger results orientation, and reinforces accountability across all levels of cooperation. By integrating these methodological developments, the updated Action Plan provides a more robust framework for tracking progress, assessing effectiveness, and adapting actions to emerging challenges and opportunities.

The update of the Action plan does not modify the main objectives of the Strategy, nor its governance or its multilevel and cross-sectoral cooperation model.

## 1.2. Strategic context

The most essential framework for the Strategy and this Action Plan is the European policy context. The EU Strategic agenda 2024-2029 focuses on three priorities:

- A free and democratic Europe
- A stronger and secure Europe
- A prosperous and competitive Europe

This Action Plan aligns to the EU core principles and priorities whenever the Strategy can make a contribution while identifying and addressing the common topics of national relevance for all Strategy Member States. Gender equality is a core principle of the European Union<sup>3</sup>, a prerequisite for achieving the EU's core objectives of growth, employment and social cohesion and is thus vital for the successful implementation of the Strategy.

Strengthening the region's resilience has become increasingly vital as geopolitical tensions, hybrid threats, and climate-driven risks place new demands on the Baltic Sea Region. The Strategy and the Action Plan offer a platform for improving shared awareness and enhancing preparedness across sectors and reinforce the EU security and resilience strategies by promoting coordinated regional responses to shared risks in the Baltic Sea Region. By integrating resilience considerations across the Policy Areas, the Strategy helps to ensure that cooperation framework remains robust and that the Member States are better equipped to anticipate and respond to disruptions. Alignment with the European Green Deal and the objective of achieving climate-neutrality by 2050 continues to guide the Strategy as a whole. Therefore, all Policy Areas must take into account EU climate and environmental policy objectives. Strengthening the efforts to do no harm to the

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<sup>3</sup> Articles 2 and 3(3) of the TEU, Articles 21 and 23 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, Article 8 of the TFEU, Declaration 19 of the Treaty of Lisbon

environment<sup>4</sup>, as well as on climate-proofing, resilience building, prevention and preparedness in light of the evolving security environment, is crucial. Policy Areas have reflected the concept of societal resilience in the design of their Actions, recognising the interlinkages between climate, security, digital and socio-economic risks. This approach is consistent with the strong political commitment to climate action and resilience confirmed by the European Council<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, at the global level, the Strategy, through the implementation of its Actions, joins the effort to contribute to the relevant Sustainable Development Goals.

In line with the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027<sup>6</sup>, the Strategy Member States recognise that active participation of young people is essential for the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and sustainability of the macro-regional strategies. The Strategy sees young people not only as beneficiaries but as active partners in shaping transnational cooperation, sustainability, and democratic resilience. Meaningful inclusion of young people in the Strategy is to take place via youth organisations and networks in the Baltic Sea Region. Building on the experience of the Baltic Sea Youth Forum, these organisations will act as a collective consultative body to the Strategy, providing input to the National Coordinators Group, Policy Area Coordinators, the Baltic Sea Strategy Point and other stakeholders on issues relevant to the Strategy and future-oriented regional development.

Constructive cooperation with neighbouring countries remains important for the effective implementation of the Strategy. Where relevant and appropriate, cooperation based on shared values and mutual interests, the rule of law, respect for human rights and social cohesion should be promoted across activities in all Policy Areas.

Furthermore, the numerous international and regional cooperation formats (organisations, networks, initiatives etc.) within the Baltic Sea Region constitute an essential part of the Strategy operative environment. The Strategy provides these formats with a wider strategic and institutional framework, while benefiting from their experience and expertise. It contributes to a better division of labour among the various formats, which helps avoid overlaps and strengthens synergies. The macro-regional cooperation is without prejudice to the decision-making mechanisms of these bodies.

### 1.3. Objectives and Policy Areas

The three objectives of the Strategy – Save the Sea, Connect the Region and Increase Prosperity – remain

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<sup>4</sup> Pursuant to the “Do no significant harm the environment” principle stemming from the Taxonomy Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2020/852 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2020 on the establishment of a framework to facilitate sustainable investment, and amending Regulation (EU) 2019/2088) and also recalled by the European Green Deal ([https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/banking-and-finance/sustainable-finance/eu-taxonomy-sustainable-activities\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/banking-and-finance/sustainable-finance/eu-taxonomy-sustainable-activities_en)).

<sup>5</sup> EU Fit for 55 legislative package: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fit-for-55/>

<sup>6</sup> Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (2018/C 456/01)

valid and in force<sup>7</sup>. Each of them covers a wide range of policies and has impact on the other objectives – they are interlinked and interdependent.

The three objectives are supported through 14 thematic fields, implemented by the Policy Areas:

- Strengthening sustainability, resilience and competitiveness in bio-based systems (Policy Area Bioeconomy)
- Strengthening participation, sustainability and cooperation in the cultural sphere (Policy Area Culture)
- Contributing to a sustainable working life and strengthening the regions competitiveness in research (Policy Area Education)
- Advancing a sustainable, integrated and resilient energy system (Policy Area Energy)
- Preventing and reducing pollution and tackling legacy pollution (Policy Area Hazards)
- Strengthening population, well-being and crisis resilience (Policy Area Health)
- Supporting transformative innovation policies and actions aiming at tackling common macro-regional challenges (Policy Area Innovation)
- Reducing nutrient pollution to the Baltic Sea (Policy Area Nutri)
- Strengthening safe, resilient and sustainable maritime operations (Policy Area Maritime Safety)
- Strengthening societal resilience and crisis preparedness (Policy Area Secure)
- Advancing environmentally sustainable shipping (Policy Area Ship)
- Strengthening coherent land- and sea-use planning for sustainable development (Policy Area Spatial Planning)
- Strengthening sustainable, competitive and resilient tourism (Policy Area Tourism)
- Enhancing multimodal, emissions-free, innovative and resilient transport (Policy Area Transport)

As the Strategy has evolved, Policy Areas have become more interlinked and interdependent. Their Actions are often cross-sectoral, and their scope serves more than one Strategy objective. These interlinkages are strongly encouraged by the Strategy.

## 1.4. Actors and modes of operation

### 1.4.1. Actors

The Strategy is based on open and transparent participation, inclusiveness and multi-level governance. The wide thematic coverage of the Policy Areas provides opportunities for a diverse kind of stakeholders to engage, contribute with their experience and propose initiatives that align with the Strategy's objectives.

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<sup>7</sup> European Commission (2012). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. (COM(2012) 128)

While the Strategy promotes the building-up of longer-term networks and platforms, new stakeholders as well as novel ideas and initiatives are welcome.

Among the established stakeholders are national, regional and local authorities, intergovernmental and non-governmental bodies, universities and research organisations. However, there is a need to increase the involvement of non-governmental organisations, civil society, youth organisations and the business community.

### 1.4.2. Modes of operation

Each Policy Area develops Actions which contribute to achieving the Strategy objectives. The proposed activities under each Action are to be evaluated based on their merits and expected added value.

The concrete coordination outputs implemented under each Action is decided by the Policy Area to best suit the needs of the Action. Outputs under an Action can be – but are not limited to - projects (single or grouped in clusters), processes, networks or platforms. Outputs can be linked either to existing capacities or to break new ground.

## 1.5. Funding

As the Strategy does not have specifically allocated financial resources, funding for Actions under the Strategy is intended to come from existing financial instruments available, taking into account that all funding sources have their own eligibility rules, selection criteria and implementation modalities.

In the EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, as well as post-2027, the Interreg programmes under the European Regional Development Fund remain key support to the implementation of the Strategy. However, given the limited programme budgets of these programmes, and their scope, they cannot fully meet all the needs of the region.

Therefore, it is important to mobilise also EU shared and centrally managed funds, cooperation programmes and other funding sources. It is also important to mobilise the funds from the European Investment Bank and other international financial institutions, as well as private sector financing for the effective implementation of the Strategy.

The managing authorities of the EU shared management funds in the region play an important role by cooperating with the Strategy. The Strategy seeks to facilitate exchanges of information and synergies and enabling these funds to bring additional value to the region. Close cooperation with the managing authorities of the programmes implementing these funds, and their networks is of the essence for the development of the region. National Coordinators and members of Steering Groups cooperate with managing authorities at the national level, National Coordinators on strategic level and Steering Groups members on operational level. On the operational level, Policy Area Coordinators, with the support from the Baltic Sea Strategy Point, have the main responsibility for fostering cooperation between the Strategy and the funding sources ensuring that the Actions can be funded.

## 1.6. Monitoring and evaluation

The Strategy impact is evaluated internally based on the impact pathway concept, further details of which are laid out in the Strategy's Guidelines for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation approved by the National Coordinators Group. Furthermore, the European Commission monitors the overall added value and development of all the Member States, including the Strategy. It provides a periodic report to the other EU institutions on progress made in implementing the Strategies and the results achieved.

The National Coordinators Group endorses the overall monitoring and evaluation framework within the Strategy.

## 1.7. Communication

Communication and ensuring visibility of its impact and results are integral parts of implementing the Strategy, as highlighted by the Council of the European Union<sup>8</sup>. The communication includes, but is not limited to, jointly created impact, demonstrating the added value of cooperation, and strengthening visibility of the priorities laid out in the Action Plan. Successful communications help to strengthen political commitment and stakeholder engagement, which supports achieving the Strategy's objectives.

The communication roles and responsibilities are laid out in Chapter 2. The National Coordinators Group ensures strategic guidance for the Strategy communication. More detailed mission and vision, long-term communication objectives and principles to ensure coherent, transparent, and goal-oriented communication across all stakeholders are laid out in EUSBSR Guidelines for Strategic Communication and the EUSBSR Guidelines for Visual Identity approved by the National Coordinators Group. Through the Baltic Sea Strategy Point, the National Coordinators Group regularly reviews communication practices to ensure that messages remain consistent with the Strategy's objectives.

# 2. Governance

## 2.1. The purpose and structure of the Strategy governance

The governance structure provides clear roles and responsibilities of the various actors, strengthened management capacity at the strategic level, effective decision-making and reinforced results-orientation. Furthermore, it empowers relevant stakeholders, increases their ownership and encourages them to network, cooperate and participate in the implementation and development of the Strategy.

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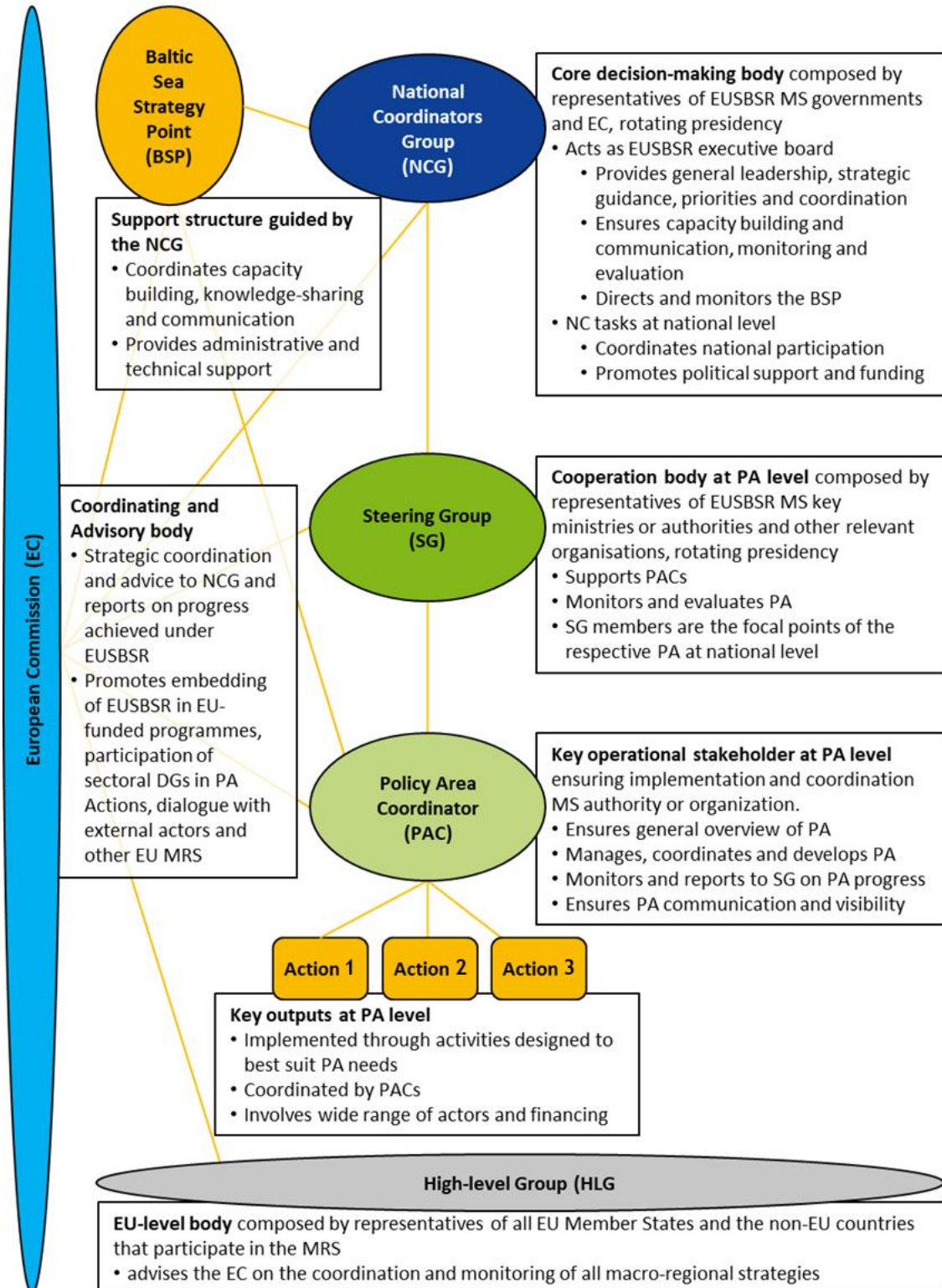
<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union (2025). Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies - Council conclusions (16.09.2025), 12369/25, p.3



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Clear links to policy-making at the national and regional levels serve to increase the engagement of line ministries and other public authorities and to solidify political support and implementation in the Strategy's Member States. The governance of the Strategy is consolidated with the creation of the Baltic Sea Strategy point. The Strategy Point coordinates capacity building, knowledge-sharing and communication.

This Action Plan only specifies the main elements of the Strategy governance. More details are provided in the National Coordinators Group's Rules of Procedure and those of the various Policy Area Steering Groups. The National Coordinators Group may decide on further specifications as needed. The group ensures that all documents and other essential information related to the Strategy governance, are published on the Strategy website.





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*Figure 1. Simplified version of the EUSBSR governance structure*

## 2.2. National Coordinators and National Coordinators Group

Each Strategy Member State nominates a National Coordinator and one or more deputies. They need to keep the National Coordinators Group, the Presidency and the European Commission updated as soon as changes occur. The National Coordinators have two kinds of tasks. On the one hand, they represent their governments in the National Coordinators Group, and, on the other hand, they perform their tasks at the national level in their own capacity.

The National Coordinators Group consists of representatives of all Strategy Member States. The European Commission participates regularly in the meetings of the group. Representatives of other countries, organisations and cooperation formats can be invited by the Presidency to participate in the National Coordinators Group meetings on an ad-hoc basis but cannot participate in the decision-making.

The group meets at least four times per year. A joint meeting between National Coordinators and Policy Area Coordinators is held at least once a year.

The National Coordinators Group meetings are organised and chaired by the Member State holding the Presidency, in cooperation with the European Commission and with support of the Baltic Sea Strategy Point, which also take part in the meetings.

The National Coordinators Group adopts its own Rules of Procedure.

### 2.2.1. Tasks of the National Coordinators Group

The National Coordinators Group is the core decision-making body within the governance structure of the Strategy, acting as its executive board. The National Coordinators Group tasks include:

- general leadership, coordination and development of the Strategy, including providing strategic guidance and establishing priorities
- acting as interface and link between the Strategy and the political level
- ensuring targeted capacity building for stakeholders, in general via the Baltic Sea Strategy Point
- ensuring communication, information and publicity about the Strategy, in general via the Baltic Sea Strategy Point
- ensuring a monitoring and evaluation framework
- appointing Lead and Co-Policy Area Coordinators and providing a common structure for the Steering Group Rules of Procedure
- directing and monitoring the work of the Baltic Sea Strategy Point, taking into account specific requirements due to the fact that the Strategy Point is implemented as a project
- serving as guardian of the proper functioning of the governance of the Strategy
  - any noncompliance with the Action Plan that affects the proper functioning of the Strategy must be addressed by the National Coordinators Group
- representing the Strategy in its overall relations, e.g. with the European Commission, other EU institutions, other EU macro-regional strategies, managing authorities including Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme, Interact and other cooperation formats in the region

- initiating revisions of the Strategy and/or the Action Plan
- deciding on revisions of the Action Plan after having consulted the Policy Areas and other relevant stakeholders<sup>9</sup>
  - the National Coordinators Group can decide on revisions of the Action Plan as long as these do not modify the Strategy itself, which can only be altered by a decision of the Council

### 2.2.2. Presidency of the National Coordinators Group

The National Coordinators Group Presidency rotates annually among the Strategy's Member States (beginning of July – end of June), in line with a rotation schedule agreed by the Group and included in its Rules of Procedure. The Presidency coordinates the National Coordinators and the Policy Area Coordinators, supported by the Baltic Sea Strategy Point and in cooperation with the European Commission, and strives to facilitate decision-making and cooperation.

In order to promote coherence and continuity of work across the Presidency cycles, regular information exchange takes place between the current Presidency and the previous and incoming Presidencies. This Presidency Trio has a supportive role vis-à-vis the incumbent Presidency, as described in the National Coordinators Group Rules of Procedure. The European Commission and the Baltic Sea Strategy Point are invited to participate in the Trio meetings.

### 2.2.3. National Coordinators' tasks at national level

In addition to their responsibilities as members of the National Coordinators Group, the National Coordinators have tasks at the national level. Their role in the national administration includes:

- promoting political support and commitment to the Strategy
- ensuring overall coordination and overview of, as well as guidance and support for, active participation by different national stakeholders in the implementation of the Strategy
- promoting appropriate funding for the Strategy implementation, including by encouraging cooperation with relevant managing authorities
- acting as interface and link between the operational level of the Strategy and the political level
- promoting the visibility and raising awareness of the Strategy, its actions and results

## 2.3. Policy Areas

Policy Areas represent the expertise in their respective areas of activity and ensure the implementation of the Strategy and the Action Plan. Having an overview of the relevant sectors, Policy Areas hold policy discussions and identify key ways to achieve the Strategy objectives through different means of action and determine how to best implement the required solutions.

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<sup>9</sup> The National Coordinators Group sends the Action Plan proposal to the European Commission. After completion of the Commission internal procedure, the Action Plan is published as a Commission Staff Working Document (SWD), which is the legal status of the Action Plan.

Policy Areas are managed operationally by Policy Area Coordinators, supported and guided strategically by their respective Steering Groups.

### 2.3.1. Steering Groups

Each Policy Area has a Steering Group. Steering Group members are representatives of the national or regional governments of the Strategy Member States. The Steering Group may be an existing cooperation body within the Policy Area Coordinator organisation, if appropriate and approved by the National Coordinators Group.

Steering Group members have two kinds of tasks. On the one hand, they represent their governments in their respective Steering Group. On the other hand, they perform their tasks as focal points at the national level.

The objective is that all Steering Groups include members from all of the Strategy's Member States. However, a Member State can choose not to participate in a specific Steering Group. A Member State can also appoint more than one representative to a Steering Group, if this is necessary due to the structure of the Member State or other similar reasoning. In this case, one of the representatives has to be nominated as the main representative and act as such. Steering Group members should come from key ministries or authorities in the relevant field. They should have sufficient capability, mandate and resources to fulfil their tasks as required by the Strategy.

A Steering Group may also invite representatives of the neighbouring countries or organisations to join the group as members or observers, upon a decision taken by consensus by the Strategy's Member States' representatives in the group. However, before such a decision is implemented, it has to be endorsed by the National Coordinators Group. Such representatives of the neighbouring countries or organisations cannot block decisions of the Strategy's Member States, but they may choose to opt out of specific decisions taken by the Steering Group. This must be laid down in the Steering Groups' Rules of Procedure.

Policy Area Coordinators must keep the Steering Group Presidency and the Baltic Sea Strategy Point updated as soon as changes in the composition of Steering Group membership occur.

Steering Groups should convene at least twice a year. Online meetings are encouraged. The meetings are prepared and organised by the Steering Group Presidency, in close cooperation with the respective Policy Areas Coordinators. The Presidency should rotate among the members of the Steering Group, normally on an annual basis.

Steering Groups take decisions by consensus. They adopt their own Rules of Procedure, in accordance with the Action Plan and the common structure for the Steering Group Rules of Procedure provided by the National Coordinators Group, while taking into account the specific requirements of their Policy Area.

Steering Groups are cooperation bodies at Policy Area level. Their main task consists of:

- supporting the respective Policy Area Coordinator/s in fulfilling their tasks, including:
  - guiding the development of the Policy Area in general by policy discussions and by endorsing new objectives, developments and operation formats, including flagships
  - endorsing proposals to update targets, references etc. that do not change the Action Plan

- substantially, in close dialogue with the European Commission<sup>10</sup>
- ensuring linkages to relevant national and regional policy-making.
- monitoring and evaluating the respective Policy Area:
  - endorsing the work plans and annual substantial reports on achievements for the Policy Area, drafted by the Policy Areas Coordinators, and submitting these documents to the National Coordinators Group for information.

### 2.3.2. Steering Group members' tasks at national level

In addition to their responsibilities within their group, Steering Group members representing national or regional governments serve as focal points in their respective administrations. Their role includes:

- acting as liaison between their Policy Area and the respective administration, ensuring linkages between macro-regional and national or regional policy processes
- raising awareness and ownership of the objectives, means and achievements of the Strategy within their respective administrations and amongst other relevant stakeholders
- cooperating with relevant managing authorities in their respective home countries, regarding the operational level
- supporting the National Coordinator in promoting political commitment to the Strategy as well as in raising national awareness and promoting visibility of the Strategy

### 2.3.3. Policy Area Coordinators

Each Policy Area is managed by one or several Policy Area Coordinators. They are appointed and recalled by the National Coordinators Group, following a proposal by the respective Steering Group. If a Policy Area has more than one Coordinator, the National Coordinators Group decides which one of them is the leading Coordinator, following a proposal by the respective Steering Group. The Policy Area Coordination organisations are specified in the List of Policy Area Coordinators, available on the Strategy's webpage.

A Policy Area Coordinator, representing a Member State can be a ministry or other official authority of the national or regional government. A Policy Area Coordinator can also be an organisation or an intergovernmental or non-governmental body, which can ensure the operationalisation of a Policy Area. The appointed Policy Area Coordinator cannot hand over the coordinator role or tasks to another authority, organisation or body. A Policy Area Coordinator organisation has to keep the corresponding National Coordinator, the Steering Group Presidency, Baltic Sea Strategy Point and the European Commission updated as soon as relevant personnel changes occur.

The Policy Area Coordinator organisations work in close cooperation with each other and divide their tasks in their work plans to best suit the needs of the Policy Area. The Lead Coordinator is responsible for coordination among the Policy Area Coordinator organisations and for the administration of the Policy Area.

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<sup>10</sup> Decisions on substantial changes to the Action Plan remain the sole competence of the National Coordinators Group.

Policy Area Coordinators are the key operational stakeholders of the Strategy at the Policy Area level, ensuring the implementation of the Strategy with support and guidance of their respective Steering Group. They facilitate and serve as a strong liaison between their Policy Area groups of actors by offering a platform for exchanging and coordinating initiatives, stakeholders, policy processes and information.

The tasks of a Policy Area Coordinator can be divided into four groups:

- ensuring a general overview of the Policy Area, including various types of developments and modes of operation
- managing, coordinating and developing the Policy Area, including:
  - facilitating the implementation of Actions defined in the Action Plan, while ensuring that horizontal aspects, notably addressing climate change and cooperation with the neighbouring countries and organisations, are appropriately integrated into the work of the Policy Area
  - facilitating the funding of the Actions, incl. via cooperation with the managing authorities;
  - facilitating the involvement and cooperation of and relevant policy discussions among stakeholders
  - identifying and facilitating cooperation activities, including networks, platforms and processes
  - liaising and cooperating with other Policy Areas, the Baltic Sea Strategy Point and other stakeholders to ensure coherence and synergies and to avoid duplication
  - contributing, as appropriate, to the targeted capacity building for stakeholders coordinated by the Baltic Sea Strategy Point
- monitoring and reporting on progress within the Policy Area, including i.e.:
  - drafting a work plan based on the Action Plan, and an annual substantial report on Policy Area achievements, to be endorsed by the respective Steering Group and submitted to the National Coordinators Group for information
  - reporting to the Steering Group on relevant developments within the Policy Area, incl. possible needs to revise the Action Plan.
- ensuring communication and visibility of the Policy Area, including:
  - maintaining and updating the website and other suitable communication channels for the Policy Area, included in or linked to the Strategy website, with the support of the Baltic Sea Strategy Point
  - providing information and suitable material within the scope of the Policy Area to the Strategy Point for communication and visibility purposes

## 2.4. EUSBSR Annual Forum

Since 2010 a yearly forum has been organised to support the Strategy. The purposes of the EUSBSR Annual Forum are to communicate on the work of the Strategy, its objectives and achievements to stakeholders, policymakers and a wider audience, to stimulate policy discussions, to share results and to provide

stakeholders with a networking opportunity.

The Annual Forum takes place in one of the Strategy's Member States and aims to attract key stakeholders and active partners of the Strategy from local, regional, national and EU level. The hosting of the Annual Forum is based on a sequence of the Strategy's Member States agreed by the National Coordinators Group and included in its Rules of Procedure. The roles and responsibilities of the Member States in connection to the Annual Forum are elaborated in the Guidelines for the EUSBSR Annual Forum organisers.

## 2.5. European Commission

The European Commission plays a key role within the Strategy. DG REGIO provides strategic coordination and advice to the National Coordinators Group on the managing and developing strategy and gives guidance to Strategy actors on prioritising strategic frameworks and policies. It also strives to ensure that the Strategy is duly taken into account in the design and implementation of all relevant EU policies and financial instruments.

DG REGIO promotes interlinkages and alignment between the Strategy and relevant EU-funded programmes during their programming and implementation (EU, national, regional and centrally managed funding instruments), including transnational and cross-border cooperation programmes. It promotes the embedding of the Strategy at both strategic document level and at operational level, including by promoting continuous dialogue between European Commission actors (desk officers in DG REGIO and sectoral Directorates-General) and programme bodies (e.g. monitoring committees, managing authorities, joint secretariats, intermediate bodies).

DG REGIO promotes and facilitates the dialogue and involvement of stakeholders in the Baltic Sea Region within the EU, and across EU macro-regional strategies. DG REGIO supports participation of European Commission sectoral Directorates-General in the work of Policy Areas, as appropriate.

The European Commission reports regularly to other EU institutions on the progress made in implementing the Strategy and on the results achieved. It also promotes coherence and mutual learning between the EUSBSR and other EU macro-regional strategies. For this purpose, every two years, the European Commission presents a report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

DG REGIO regularly participates in the National Coordinators Group meetings, and, where possible, in meetings of Steering Groups and Policy Area Coordinators.

## 2.6. Baltic Sea Strategy Point

The Baltic Sea Strategy Point is a function providing administrative and technical support for the Strategy management, development and communication. Its main tasks are:

- coordinating targeted capacity building for the Strategy stakeholders, including those in neighbouring countries
- coordinating knowledge sharing and best practices between Policy Areas as regards integration of essential elements, such as addressing climate change and cooperation with the neighbouring

countries

- coordinating the overall communication activities of the Strategy
- coordinating the monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy
- serving as the institutional memory of the Strategy
- ensuring technical support to the National Coordinators Group and, where possible, also to Policy Area Coordinators
- supporting the planning and organisation of the EUSBSR Annual Fora

The Baltic Sea Strategy Point is guided by and accountable to the National Coordinators Group, which decides on its terms of reference and its detailed tasks. The day-to-day work of the Strategy Point is conducted in close contact with the National Coordinators Group Presidency.

## 2.7. High Level Group

The High Level Group on macro-regional strategies is an EU-level body, advising the European Commission on the coordination and monitoring of all macro-regional strategies. It is made up of official representatives of all EU Member States and the neighbouring countries that participate in the macro-regional strategies.

The High Level Group ensures the coordination and monitoring of the macro-regional strategies, assesses progress made in their implementation and may provide policy orientation and strategic guidance. It is the forum where the approaches and practices of each macro-regional strategies are compared, in order to maximise the leverage and impact of the strategies. The annual High Level Group meetings provide overall strategic guidance also for the individual strategies, including the EUSBSR.

## 3. Policy Areas and Actions

The Actions are grounded in a shared assessment of the region's main challenges and outline the changes needed to move the Baltic Sea Region toward the objectives of saving the sea, increasing prosperity and connecting the region. They are developed jointly by the Member States through the line-ministries in the Policy Areas and the National Coordinators Group, in close dialogue with the European Commission, ensuring alignment with regional needs and relevant EU policy priorities. This collaborative process gives the Actions a clear mandate and reflects a common commitment to addressing the region's key challenges.

Each Action describes an issue that requires coordinated effort across borders or sectors to make progress within its Policy Area. Actions do not prescribe specific projects or assign operational tasks to individual organisations. Instead, they set out the direction of change needed at policy, strategic and practical levels (outcome).

The Action format supports all actors—national, regional and local authorities, funding programmes, businesses, NGOs, research bodies and youth organisations—in identifying how their activities, investments or reforms can contribute to shared regional goals. The Actions provide a strategic reference point for aligning policies and strategies, shaping projects, designing funding calls, and strengthening cross-border cooperation



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for positive impact on the Baltic Sea Region.

The implementation of the Actions is supported by the Policy Areas, where Policy Area Coordinators and Steering Groups work together to organise and guide cooperation. Their role is to bring together the relevant actors and policy levels, facilitate cross-sector and cross-border collaboration, support coherence with EU policies and ensure that regional perspectives feed into wider European policy discussions.

While the Policy Areas provide the framework and guidance, progress depends on the broader community of stakeholders who contribute to the Actions through their own mandates and initiatives.

## Policy Area Bioeconomy – Strengthening sustainability, resilience and competitiveness in bio-based systems

The bioeconomy encompasses agriculture, forestry, fisheries, aquaculture and other bio-based industries that provide renewable resources, food, materials and energy. These sectors are essential to the Baltic Sea Region’s sustainability, competitiveness and rural vitality. The macro-region faces environmental and climate pressures, uneven value-chain development and challenges affecting resource use, innovation and the resilience of rural and coastal communities. Differences in policy approaches, market conditions and capacities are on the one hand rich in the regions, but they may also limit the potential of the region’s rich marine and terrestrial resources. Macro-regional cooperation supports more aligned and effective bioeconomy development by strengthening shared learning, sustainable resource management and innovation.

### Actions:

- Enhance food system resilience and rural cohesion
- Reduce nutrient runoff and increase resilience in agriculture and forestry
- Increase blue and green sustainable, resilient, resource-efficient and competitive bioeconomy

### Policy Area Bioeconomy Action 1:

#### Enhance food system resilience and rural cohesion

##### **Addressed challenges**

Food systems across the macro-region face growing pressure from climate change, environmental degradation and market volatility, which reduce stability and increase vulnerability in rural areas. Agriculture is vulnerable to shocks in energy, fertilizer and input markets. Rural communities struggle with limited opportunities, ageing populations, and outmigration. Trade or energy disruptions can have impact the entire region. Differences in innovation capacity, value-chain development and the uptake of sustainable land-use and production practices slow progress toward more resilient and resource-efficient food systems. Uneven access to knowledge, skills and diversification opportunities limits the ability of rural communities to adapt to transitions and maintain economic vitality. Fragmented approaches across food, environment and rural development policies make it harder to strengthen territorial cohesion and build long-term resilience. These challenges highlight the need for coordinated efforts that support sustainable practices, strengthen rural capacities and improve integration across food-system actors and policies.

##### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires approaches that strengthen cooperation across food-system actors, promote sustainable and climate-adaptive practices, promote biobased sustainable business in rural areas, strengthen local producing (food, fertilizers, energy), promote short supply chains that ensure the food security, improve farmer income, and reinforce the capacity of rural communities to innovate and diversify. Better alignment of food, environment and rural development policies supports more coherent action, while joint learning and exchange help actors adopt approaches that improve resilience, resource efficiency and value-chain integration. Enhanced coordination between institutions and sectors enables the development

of pathways that connect production, processing and consumption more effectively. As a result, the outcomes focus on supporting sustainable practices, improving policy alignment and strengthening the capacity of rural areas to respond to environmental and economic pressures and risk management.

Indicators:

- reviewed national strategies in response to integrate food security and rural resilience
- increased number of municipalities have introduced new measures to support local production and short food supply chain
- increased share of farms applying climate-adaptive practices (e.g. nutrient recycling, drought/flood-resilient crops), increased number of entities running bio-based, sustainable business in rural areas
- at least one EU programme (e.g. CAP or Interreg) and initiatives of national funding explicitly reference Policy Area Bioeconomy priorities, demonstrated through calls, guidance, or budget lines supporting food resilience and sustainable business in rural areas
- new or revised rural and agricultural policies include climate adaptation and mitigation goals, such as nutrient recycling, reduced food waste, or farming practices that lower emissions and increase resilience

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes strengthen food-system resilience and support more sustainable and cohesive development across rural areas in the macro-region. Wider uptake of sustainable practices and improved alignment between policies and actors enhance the ability of food systems to respond and be resilient to geopolitical tensions, market disruption, environmental, climate and other types of crises. Strengthened cooperation and more integrated approaches across sectors reinforce long-term resource efficiency, support diversification and improve opportunities for rural communities. Over time, these developments contribute to more resilient food systems, stronger territorial cohesion and more sustainable rural livelihoods across the Baltic Sea Region.

Indicators:

- continuous (yearly) increase in national and regional food self-sufficiency rates in the Baltic Sea Region
- continuous (yearly) positive development of sustainable business in rural areas
- reduction in agricultural greenhouse gas emissions per unit of production (kg CO<sub>2</sub>e/kg output).
- reduction in harvest losses caused by droughts/floods/forest fires

### **Policy Area Bioeconomy Action 2:**

#### **Reduce nutrient runoff and increase resilience in agriculture and forestry**

##### **Addressed challenges**

Nutrient runoff continues to place pressure on the Baltic Sea and surrounding ecosystems, while agriculture and forestry face increasing stress from climate change, soil degradation and biodiversity loss. The geopolitical situation increases uncertainty for farmers to access energy and fertilizers. Affordable, scalable solutions are

still lacking, while the national approaches vary. Urgent action is needed to reduce nutrient losses from fields and forests, to strengthen the soil and the resilience of the primary production, and to keep the rural economies viable. The desired impact is a measurable reduction in nutrient leakage and more resilient agricultural and forestry systems that can withstand climatic and economic shocks.

Fragmented approaches to land, water and environmental management further hinder efforts to improve resilience, reduce nutrient inputs and support more sustainable development. These challenges highlight the need for more cooperation and exchange of information on climate-resilient and resource-efficient practices in agriculture and forestry.

### **Needed outcomes**

These challenges require approaches that strengthen sustainable land management, improve cooperation across sectors and support wider uptake of resilient agricultural and forestry practices. More coordinated efforts and better alignment of policies and programmes help authorities and practitioners introduce cost-effective and profitable practices and tools that reduce nutrient runoff and improve soil, water and resource management. Strengthening institutional cooperation and promoting shared learning enable actors to respond more effectively to environmental pressures. As a result, the outcomes focus on supporting the introduction of sustainable practices, improving alignment across strategies and programmes and reinforcing the capacity of agriculture and forestry to adopt cost-effective and profitable approaches that enhance resilience and sustainability.

Indicators:

- introduction of new sustainable practices or tools, affordable for farmers and forest owners (5-8 different tools or practices will be developed in different parts of the Baltic Sea Region by 2035)
- goals of the Action aligned in different funding programmes and strategies in the Baltic Sea Region
- at least two of the above-mentioned sustainable new practices or tools will significantly support climate change mitigation and adaptation

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes support long-term improvements by strengthening the sustainability and resilience of agriculture and forestry across the macro-region. As sustainable practices and tools become more widely adopted, social sustainability and profitability of production will improve, nutrient losses decrease, resource use becomes more efficient and land and water management systems grow more climate adaptive. Over time, these developments improve social, economic and environmental conditions in the Baltic Sea Region, reduce vulnerability to climate impacts and support more sustainable agricultural and forestry production.

Indicators:

- increasing share of sustainable farming and forestry practices in use across the macro-region by 2040
- increasing share of recycled nutrients in the Baltic Sea Region by 2035
- sustainable new practices or tools contribute to climate change mitigation
- sustainable new practices or tools contribute to climate change adaptation

### Policy Area Bioeconomy Action 3:

## Increase blue and green sustainable, resilient, resource-efficient and competitive bioeconomy

### Addressed challenges

Blue and green bioeconomy sectors across the macro-region operate under varying conditions, with differences in innovation capacity, value-chain development and access to knowledge slowing progress toward sustainable and competitive growth. Limited integration between marine and terrestrial systems reduces opportunities for circularity and more efficient resource use. Environmental pressures and climate risks add stress to bio-based sectors, while differing policy frameworks and institutional capacities hinder long-term resilience and coordinated development. Uneven cross-border cooperation further restricts the ability to manage shared resources effectively and align efforts across the region. These challenges signal the need for more integrated approaches, stronger cooperation and broader uptake of sustainable and climate-adaptive practices.

### Needed outcomes

These challenges require responses that improve how marine and terrestrial sectors work together, strengthen policy alignment and support wider adoption of sustainable and circular practices. Better integration across blue and green bioeconomy systems helps overcome fragmented development, while enhanced cooperation creates the conditions for actors to share knowledge, coordinate priorities and adopt approaches that increase efficiency and resilience. As a result, the outcomes focus on aligning strategies, improving the uptake of sustainable practices and reinforcing climate-resilient development across bio-based value chains.

### Indicators:

- at least 2 Baltic Sea Region countries adopt or update bioeconomy strategies to include sustainable biomass valorisation by 2035
- some regional authorities/municipalities introduce new practices for nutrient recycling or circular bio-based products by 2035
- at least one EU (e.g. Horizon Europe, Interreg) and one national programme include calls or budget lines supporting sustainable blue and green biomass valorisation, demonstrated through explicit references to Policy Area Bioeconomy objectives
- stronger integration of sustainable biomass development priorities into regional and national approaches
- new biomass policies and projects explicitly contribute to emission reductions and carbon storage, while enhancing resilience to climate impacts through diversified and sustainable value chains

### Expected impact

Together, the outcomes drive structural change by enabling more coordinated development of blue and green bioeconomy sectors, improving resource efficiency and strengthening climate resilience. As

sustainable, circular and adaptive practices become more widely adopted, bio-based value chains diversify, reliance on fossil inputs decreases and the bioeconomy becomes more competitive and innovative. These system-level shifts form the basis for long-term improvements in environmental performance, economic development and resilience.

Indicators:

- increased share of Baltic Sea Region biomass used in high-value, sustainable applications (bio-based products, energy, materials)
- growth in Baltic Sea Region bioeconomy's contribution to regional GDP and employment
- reduction in fossil resource dependency through substitution with bio-based products, measured as increased renewable share in industrial feedstocks and energy
- higher share of forests, farms, and aquaculture systems applying climate-adaptive biomass practices, reducing vulnerability to droughts, floods, pests, and diseases

## Policy Area Culture – Strengthening participation, sustainability and cooperation in the cultural sphere

Culture supports social cohesion, inclusion and well-being across the Baltic Sea Region and contributes to innovation, resilience and a shared sense of belonging. The macro-region faces challenges linked to unequal access to cultural opportunities, digital and societal transitions and differences between national cultural systems. These pressures affect participation, limit the cultural sector's contribution to sustainable development and weaken the ability of institutions to cooperate across borders. Macro-regional cooperation strengthens coherence between cultural policies and practices by supporting shared learning, cross-border exchange and more responsive cultural environments.

Actions:

- Strengthening the cultural and creative sector of the Baltic Sea Region
- Fostering the Baltic Sea Region identity by strengthening culture and society
- Working towards a sustainable culture and a culture of sustainability

Policy Area Culture Action 1:

### Strengthening the cultural and creative sector of the Baltic Sea Region

#### **Addressed challenges**

The cultural and creative sector (CCS) is a vital contributor to social and economic life in the Baltic Sea Region, yet it faces persistent structural challenges that limit its growth, sustainability and contribution to regional prosperity. Economic precarity, fragmented structures and under-recognition of the sector's broader value weaken its capacity to act as a driver of development. Rapid technological and digital change, including AI and global competition, require adaptive strategies that many actors are not yet equipped to pursue. Limited entrepreneurial education and business capacity among artists and cultural professionals, misaligned and insufficient funding structures — particularly for micro-enterprises and freelancers — and fragmentation

within the sector reduces its ability to engage in strategic policy dialogue and advocacy. Overall, there exists an under-recognition of CCS/CCI's potential as a driver of both economic and societal development. These challenges highlight the need for better tailored support, stronger policy recognition and more cohesive development of the CCS across the macro-region.

The action addresses these challenges by working toward a more cohesive, resilient, and globally competitive cultural and creative sector in the Baltic Sea Region. It supports the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region's broader goals of increasing prosperity and strengthening regional competitiveness in a rapidly evolving global environment.

The implementation will follow a dual focus: enhancing governance and policy alignment and empowering the sector from within. The first one will focus on the development of more tailored support mechanisms and funding structures, advocating for recognition of the CCS in policy documents within the macro-region, and strengthening lobbying capacity and sector-wide representation at macro-regional and EU levels. The second one will include promoting entrepreneurship education and skills development for cultural professionals, and supporting initiatives that encourage internationalization, networking, and market access.

### **Needed outcomes**

The Action will strengthen the economic and structural resilience of the CCS in the Baltic Sea Region and equip cultural professionals and organizations with the tools, skills, and frameworks needed for long-term sustainability. Addressing the challenges above requires approaches that strengthen the strategic positioning, skills base and operating conditions of the CCS, while improving policy frameworks and funding environments. Better alignment of cultural and economic policies with the needs of the Baltic Sea Region CCS will lead to higher efficiency of supporting structures. Furthermore, the overall strengthening of educational and support systems for actors of the CCS will lead to enhanced professional skillsets within the sector. Strengthening entrepreneurial, digital and business capacities helps cultural professionals adapt to technological and market changes and improve their resilience. Enhanced transnational cooperation and networking increase opportunities for innovation, internationalisation and competitiveness. As a result, the outcomes focus on improving recognition of the CCS and its specific needs and circumstances in policy and funding frameworks, reinforcing supporting structures and skills and capacities of cultural professionals and supporting cross-border cooperation that strengthens the sector's resilience and competitiveness in the Baltic Sea Region.

Indicators:

- strengthened entrepreneurial, digital and business capacity of cultural professionals
- enhanced transnational cooperation, networks and initiatives within the Baltic Sea Region CCS
- changes in funding and support structures that better reflect the needs and specificities of the CCS
- greater attention to sustainability and green skills within CCS development and support measures

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes support long-term improvements by making the cultural and creative sector more resilient, visible and economically robust across the macro-region. Stronger policy recognition and better aligned funding frameworks and other support structures enhance the sector's ability to contribute to regional development. Improved skills and capacities among cultural professionals, combined with more

internationalised and cooperative structures, help increase innovation, diversify income sources and reduce economic precarity. Over time, these developments lead to a stronger and more stable CCS that contributes more visibly to the economic prosperity and the global competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region, while increasingly integrating sustainability into its practices and business models.

Indicators:

- greater economic success of the CCS, reflected in improved sector statistics
- improved economic stability of the sector, including fewer precarious self-employment situations

Policy Area Culture Action 2:

## Fostering the Baltic Sea Region identity by strengthening culture and society

### **Addressed challenges**

The Baltic Sea Region is facing growing societal fragmentation, weakening democratic values and increasing environmental and psychological stressors that undermine regional cohesion. Low levels of citizen engagement reduce the connection between individuals and macro-regional cooperation, while the societal relevance of culture remains underrecognised regarding its societal functions and the cross-sectoral potential, leading to culture being frequently left aside in policy making and funding priorities. Cultural underfunding, unequal access to culture and growing threats to artistic freedom weaken culture's contribution to democratic resilience, social inclusion and participatory engagement. These challenges limit the capacity of culture to strengthen societal well-being, shared identity and social cohesion across the macro-region. Addressing them requires a stronger societal role for culture and a more inclusive, accessible and democratically grounded cultural environment.

The Action aims to connect the people in the region and to reinforce a shared Baltic Sea Region identity by strengthening the societal role of culture and supporting inclusive cultural participation. It seeks to address central issues that jeopardize the social fabric of the region. By positioning culture as a crucial pillar of regional cooperation, this Action promotes a value-based and inclusive vision of the Baltic Sea Region's future. It directly contributes to the goals of the Strategy by enhancing regional cohesion, strengthening citizen engagement, and promoting a resilient and inclusive society.

The Action follows an integrated approach, focusing on both policy development and grassroots engagement through knowledge exchange, and social integration through culture and broadening participation.

### **Needed outcomes**

Responding to these challenges requires approaches that reinforce culture's role in strengthening societal resilience, deepen citizen engagement and broaden inclusive access to cultural life. They need to contribute to a mutual understanding across the region, laying the foundation for long-term resilience and integration. The recognition of culture's societal functions and its potential as a powerful tool for civic participation, innovation, and mental well-being is of great importance. This recognition across policies and strategies will help to integrate cultural perspectives into wider social, democratic and cohesion agendas. Improved cooperation and knowledge exchange support the development of participatory and accessible cultural practices, while stronger cultural policies help protect artistic freedom and enable culture-driven social

inclusion. As a result, the outcomes focus on increasing policy recognition of culture in relation to societal challenges, improving funding alignment, strengthening inclusive approaches and expanding opportunities for participation, especially for youth and marginalised groups.

#### Indicators:

- more policies making use of culture to address societal challenges
- increased integration of culture into policies, platforms and initiatives connected with broader societal themes
- observable changes in cultural policies that consider the needs of youth and marginalised groups
- societal issues and culture as part of the new Interreg Baltic Sea Region programme
- macro-regional strategies to be more clearly addressed in centrally managed programmes such as Creative Europe or AgoraEU after 2027
- greater awareness of sustainability issues supported through cultural practices and approaches

#### Expected impact

The outcomes support long-term improvements by strengthening democratic resilience, social inclusion and shared identity across the Baltic Sea Region. As culture becomes more visible in addressing societal challenges and more accessible to citizens, opportunities for participation expand and trust, cohesion and mutual understanding deepen. More inclusive and participatory cultural environments reinforce democratic values, reduce barriers to cultural engagement and support a stronger, more connected macro-regional identity. Over time, these developments help build a more resilient, cohesive and inclusive Baltic Sea Region, where cultural participation supports societal well-being and adaptive capacity in the face of environmental and social pressures.

#### Indicators:

- safeguarded artistic freedom, freedom of speech and democratic values
- increased youth engagement related to cultural participation and the Baltic Sea Region
- enhanced shared Baltic Sea Region identity
- lower thresholds and greater accessibility to cultural activities across society
- broader acceptance of sustainable behaviour within cultural activities
- higher societal resilience in the face of climate-related and social challenges

#### Policy Area Culture Action 3:

### Working towards a sustainable culture and a culture of sustainability

#### Addressed challenges

Despite growing awareness of sustainability across policy fields, the cultural sector still lacks structured integration into sustainability frameworks. Cultural institutions and policies often overlook environmental considerations, while sustainability strategies rarely incorporate cultural perspectives. This limits the sector's potential to contribute meaningfully to long-term sustainability goals and hinders the resilience of the Baltic

Sea Region's rich cultural heritage. At the same time the cultural sector itself, in particular the Baltic Sea Region cultural heritage, is increasingly threatened by climate change, environmental degradation and geopolitical instability, placing both tangible and intangible assets at greater risk. The main challenge is the weak connection between culture and sustainability, which leads to missed opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, innovation, and climate-related contributions. Sustainability principles need to be stronger integrated into cultural policies and management, especially concerning cultural heritage. Overall, there is still potential when it comes to better embedding of cultural heritage in other areas of society to achieve a broader impact.

### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires approaches that align cultural policies and practices with sustainability objectives, improve cross-sector cooperation and strengthen the capacity of heritage actors to respond to environmental risks. The goal is to strengthen intersectoral cooperation and embed sustainability into cultural actions and practices so that the cultural sector becomes both a driver and a beneficiary of sustainable development. This will increase its contribution to climate and sustainability goals across the region and help establish a broader culture of sustainability. Better integration of sustainability principles into cultural governance helps cultural institutions adopt environmentally sound practices and contribute to broader climate and development goals. Stronger cooperation with sectors such as tourism, education and spatial planning supports more coherent strategies and innovation in cultural heritage management. Links between cultural heritage and innovation i.e. by using modern technologies and creative approaches will improve its preservation, accessibility and use. This will also lead to a more sustainable cultural heritage that is safeguarded through resilient, environmentally sound approaches.

Indicators:

- more policies integrating culture and sustainability
- igniting change towards more cross-sectorality and sustainability in common policies and/or actions on preservation of cultural heritage
- more transnational initiatives combining cultural heritage and innovation
- funding calls increasingly addressing the relationship between sustainability and culture
- more effective and integrated climate relevant actions connected to culture and creativity

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes support long-term improvements by strengthening the role of culture and cultural heritage in sustainable development and increasing the resilience of cultural assets to climate and environmental pressures. Better integration of sustainability into cultural governance enables cultural actors to contribute more effectively to climate adaptation and mitigation while improving the long-term management and accessibility of cultural heritage. Over time, stronger policy alignment and innovative heritage practices enhance societal and economic value, reinforce resilience to external risks and create deeper connections between culture, sustainability and development across the Baltic Sea Region.

Indicators:

- preservation of cultural heritage is increasingly prioritised in response to external risks



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- increased societal and economic value and appreciation of preserved cultural heritage
- greater resilience to climate impacts, particularly in heritage preservation

## Policy Area Education – Contributing to a sustainable working life and strengthening the regions competitiveness in research

Education, skills, research and social wellbeing form the foundations of the long-term prosperity, resilience and democratic stability of the Baltic Sea Region. The macro-region is undergoing a triple transition: digital, green and demographic. At the same time, security pressures, labour shortages and widening inequalities challenge societies, economies and education systems. Uneven access to quality learning, skills mismatches, early school leaving, low adult learning participation and persistent gaps in basic, digital and STEAM<sup>11</sup> competences affect both inclusion and preparedness for future labour market needs. Diverse national systems also create structural differences that hinder coherence across borders.

Macro-regional cooperation is essential in this context. By strengthening links between education, skills development, employment, research and social partners, Policy Area Education supports more inclusive and future-oriented learning ecosystems that help people participate in society, adapt to changing labour market demands and contribute to sustainable economic growth. Through joint learning, evidence-informed approaches and mission oriented long-term cooperation. While respecting the autonomy of teachers and education providers, the Actions addresses youth, adults and research fostering stronger capacities at all levels and supports the development of policies and practices that reinforce resilience, wellbeing and prosperity across the Baltic Sea Region.

### Actions:

- Fostering inclusive educations to prepare young people for future challenges
- Promoting upskilling and reskilling to facilitate a sustainable working life and adapt to future labour market demands
- Strengthening international excellence and fostering wider participation in science and research by attracting, training and retaining talents

### Policy Area Education Action 1:

#### Fostering inclusive educations to prepare young people for future challenges

##### **Addressed challenges**

Education and training systems across the Baltic Sea Region face persistent challenges that limit young people's ability to succeed in increasingly complex and fast-changing societies. High rates of early school leaving, significant shares of young people not in education, employment or training and uneven performance in basic, STEAM, digital and media literacy skills weaken both social and economic resilience. Limited civic education reduces young people's capacity for democratic participation and active citizenship. Vulnerable groups face additional barriers in transitions from school to work, contributing to persistent inequalities.

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<sup>11</sup> STEAM education is a multidisciplinary learning approach that combines Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics

Young people’s mental health is also crucial for learning and participation. As these challenges affect all countries in the macro-region, fragmented national approaches hinder more coherent progress and reduce the capacity of systems to respond effectively. Addressing these issues requires strengthened cooperation, shared learning and more inclusive and future-oriented education systems.

### **Needed outcomes**

Responding to these challenges requires strengthening policies and practices that reduce early school leaving, support smoother school-to-work transitions and improve basic, STEAM, digital and civic competences. Wider use of evidence-informed approaches, joint learning and strengthened cooperation among authorities, educational institutions, civil society and social partners supports more inclusive and future-ready education systems. Improved alignment of policies and funding programmes reinforces the capacity of institutions to adopt sustainable solutions, while broader stakeholder engagement helps translate knowledge into practice. As a result, the outcomes focus on strengthening policy frameworks, increasing the uptake of improved practices, expanding stakeholder engagement and supporting education systems in preparing young people for future societal and labour-market needs.

Indicators:

- policy recommendations developed through cooperation are taken up by decision-making bodies
- policies adopted to reduce early school leaving, improve transitions and strengthen basic, digital and civic skills
- more stakeholders independently implementing approaches aligned with this Action
- funding programmes increasingly support priorities related to education, skills and active citizenship
- greater integration of climate-relevant skills and values in education-related recommendations and practices

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes support long-term improvements by strengthening young people’s skills, resilience and capacity to participate actively in society and the labour market. As education systems adopt more inclusive practices and better support transitions, early school leaving and disengagement decline, while basic, STEAM and digital skills improve. Greater emphasis on civic education and participation reinforces democratic engagement and strengthens social cohesion across the macro-region. Over time, these advancements foster a healthier, more skilled, resilient, and engaged youth population that is better equipped to navigate societal changes, support green and digital transitions, and contribute to sustained economic and democratic stability.

Indicators:

- reduced share of early school leavers in Baltic Sea Region countries
- reduced share of NEETs (“Not in Education, Employment or Training”) in Baltic Sea Region countries
- improved PISA results in mathematics, reading and science
- 80% of the region’s population with at least basic digital skills by 2030
- increased youth voter turnout in European, national and regional elections, increased youth political or societal engagement
- increased share of young people in the Baltic Sea Region demonstrating climate awareness and

climate-friendly attitudes

Policy Area Education Action 2:

**Promoting upskilling and reskilling to facilitate a sustainable working life and adapt to future labour market demands**

### **Addressed challenges**

Lifelong learning and skills development systems in the Baltic Sea Region face persistent pressures that limit their ability to respond to rapidly changing labour market and societal needs. Skills mismatches, particularly in the green and digital sectors, are growing as technological change accelerates. Labour shortages, demographic decline, emigration and uneven access to quality learning reduce the adaptability of the workforce. Many adults, especially in disadvantaged groups and regions, lack opportunities to update their skills or transition to new occupations. Outdated training systems, limited flexibility and insufficient coordination between governments, social partners, education providers and civil society lead to fragmented approaches. Financial and institutional constraints restrict the scale and effectiveness of upskilling and reskilling efforts. These challenges weaken competitiveness, reduce social cohesion and limit the region's preparedness for the green and digital transitions.

### **Needed outcomes**

Meeting these challenges requires stronger and more coherent lifelong learning systems that support people throughout their working lives and help them adapt to continuous change. Policies and institutional frameworks need to better align education and training with evolving labour market demands while ensuring inclusive and flexible learning pathways that are accessible to all adults. Strengthening cooperation between employers, social partners, education providers and public authorities is essential for addressing skills mismatches and creating opportunities for both low-skilled and highly skilled workers. Embedding the principles of the Economy of Wellbeing of People (EWP) highlights that skills policies are not only about employability. They also promote health, mental wellbeing, democratic participation, reduced inequalities and longer and healthier working lives. Greater stakeholder engagement, improved alignment of funding and shared learning across borders increase the independent uptake of lifelong learning initiatives. The outcomes therefore focus on modernising systems, expanding participation, reducing inequalities and supporting a sustainable working life for all.

Indicators:

- funding programmes increasingly supporting lifelong learning, skills development and workforce adaptability in line with this Action
- climate-relevant knowledge and skills more strongly integrated into lifelong learning approaches

### **Expected impact**

Strengthened lifelong learning systems will reduce skills shortages and mismatches, support smoother transitions between jobs and sectors and expand access to quality training, especially in green and digital fields. Better opportunities for adults to develop and update their skills will contribute to higher productivity,

economic resilience and competitiveness while empowering individuals to remain active, healthy and engaged throughout their working lives. Embedding wellbeing principles helps prevent exclusion, promotes upward mobility and supports more sustainable and healthy work environments. Over time, these developments will create a more adaptable, skilled and resilient workforce that can support the green and digital transitions and enhance social and economic stability across the Baltic Sea Region.

Indicators:

- reduced labour shortages across the macro-region
- reduced skills mismatches linked to green and digital transitions
- increased participation in lifelong learning among adults
- increase in upward mobility rates and access to education and employment
- improved life satisfaction, health, and access to basic services across all population groups
- decrease in income inequality, poverty rates, and wealth gaps
- growth in green jobs across the macro-region
- more lifelong learning programmes integrating climate-adaptation skills

Policy Area Education Action 3:

**Strengthening international excellence and fostering wider participation in science and research by attracting, training and retaining talents**

#### **Addressed challenges**

Science and research are essential for strengthening resilience to social, environmental and economic challenges and for supporting the green and digital transitions. However, the Baltic Sea Region faces persistent skills mismatches, talent shortages and low research and development intensity, which limit competitiveness and restrict participation in international research cooperation. Uneven research infrastructures, funding disparities and complex regulatory environments create barriers to talent mobility and hinder collaboration. Differences in institutional capacities and the outflow of highly skilled researchers reduce the ability of countries to participate effectively in cutting-edge research. These challenges underline the need for stronger cross-border cooperation, better talent development and more integrated research systems that support long-term societal and economic resilience across the macro-region.

#### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires stronger research and innovation policies that promote cross-border collaboration, improve talent development and retention, and support a more integrated and effective European Research Area in the Baltic Sea Region. Increased alignment of national and regional strategies with shared priorities helps institutions pool resources, strengthen their research capacities and participate more effectively in international cooperation. Improved frameworks for private-sector investment and knowledge exchange enable research institutions to better connect with industry and society. Strengthening training opportunities and supporting talent mobility and career development help attract and retain researchers, particularly in areas relevant to climate action and technological transformation. As a result, the outcomes focus on reinforcing research cooperation, supporting talent development and improving the policy and

investment environment for research across the macro-region.

#### Indicators:

- increased number of national, regional, or local policies and initiatives developed to foster collaboration in research and innovation among member states, contributing to a European Research Area
- priorities of the Baltic Sea Region research community reflected in the next Framework programme (FP 10) and other new strategies, e.g. European Life Science Strategy and European Strategy on Research Infrastructures
- policies adopted to incentivise private-sector investment in research and innovation
- EU funding programmes (e.g., Horizon Europe, Erasmus+) aligned with or made eligible for funding to promote science and research in the framework of this action
- greater prioritisation of climate-related research in policies and initiatives across the macro-region

#### Expected impact

The outcomes support long-term improvements by strengthening research excellence, competitiveness and resilience across the Baltic Sea Region. Increased cooperation and better research environments enhance participation in international programmes, support the development of shared research infrastructures and improve the capacity to address global challenges. Stronger talent development and retention help build a more robust scientific workforce, while improved connections between research, industry and society accelerate innovation and knowledge transfer. Over time, these developments contribute to a more integrated research area with stronger climate-related research capacity, enhanced societal benefits and greater economic and technological resilience across the macro-region.

#### Indicators:

- increased average results of Baltic Sea research institutions in global rankings
- increased share of researchers coming to the Baltic Sea Region in contrast to those leaving it (brain drain/brain gain)
- access to European funding: Enhanced participation in European funding programmes, measured by the number of projects initiated by lower-performing Member States in comparison to previous years
- knowledge transfer to industry and society: Increased number of new industry partnerships, spin-offs, or patents resulting from collaborative research

## Policy Area Energy – Advancing a sustainable, integrated and resilient energy system

Energy policy development the Baltic Sea Region is shaped by the three crucial goals that are shared within the EU: need for decarbonisation, energy security and market integration, as well as energy affordability.

Regional cooperation on strategic energy priorities such as renewable energy development, including offshore wind development, energy efficiency, energy market integration, region interconnectivity and enhancing energy security in the region is beneficial. Macro-regional cooperation strengthens coherence, improves system integration and supports the development of resilient, sustainable and affordable energy solutions. Such cooperation provides opportunities for stakeholders and project promoters to create projects that would provide solutions to the specific issues related to the EU political priorities at the local and regional level, adding to the existing instruments at EU level.

Actions:

- Increase the share of renewable energy
- Strengthen regional energy market integration and interconnectivity to improve system stability and resilience
- Strengthen energy efficiency

Policy Area Energy Action 1:

## Increase the share of renewable energy

### Addressed challenges

The Baltic Sea Region faces the dual challenge of **accelerating** the transition to clean energy while strengthening energy security particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The region remains partially dependent on fossil fuels and vulnerable to external energy shocks. Simultaneously, the accelerating impacts of climate change underscore the necessity of a rapid, just, and systemic transition to clean energy. This Action aims to significantly increase the share of renewable energy across the macro-region, thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening regional resilience, and contributing to the EU's 2030 and 2050 climate and energy goals. Renewable energy deployment in the Baltic Sea Region benefits greatly from macro-regional coordination. Shared resources such as the vast offshore wind potential in the Baltic Sea require joint planning, cross-border infrastructure, and harmonised permitting procedures. Increasing the share of renewables contributes directly to the objectives of the Strategy by fostering sustainable development, improving energy connectivity, and ensuring greater energy independence. Macro-regional cooperation can accelerate innovation, align regulatory frameworks, and scale investments achievements that individual countries alone could not reach as effectively.

### Needed outcomes

Responding to these challenges requires more aligned policies and planning frameworks that support coordinated renewable energy development across borders. Improved permitting processes, aligned approaches to offshore wind deployment and more strategic investment in cross-border and decentralised infrastructure can accelerate the expansion of clean energy systems. Strengthened cooperation among authorities, grid operators, municipalities, energy producers and civil society helps translate shared knowledge into policy improvements and practical adoption of renewable solutions. Greater alignment between funding mechanisms and regional priorities supports wider uptake of renewable energy and helps create more flexible and climate-resilient systems. As a result, the outcomes focus on policy alignment,

improved regulatory practices, stronger cross-border planning and clearer integration of climate-mitigation and adaptation needs in renewable energy development.

Indicators:

- more national authorities adopt streamlined permitting procedures to support renewable energy deployment
- more stakeholders independently aligning local and regional energy planning with macro-regional renewable energy objectives
- funding programmes increasingly supporting renewable energy integration and cross-border cooperation
- climate-mitigation and climate-adaptation considerations more strongly integrated into renewable energy planning and policies

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes support long-term improvements by enabling faster and more coordinated deployment of renewable energy across the macro-region. As regulatory barriers are reduced and planning becomes more aligned, renewable energy production increases, fossil-fuel dependence declines, and the region becomes more resilient to external shocks. Stronger cross-border cooperation and improved system flexibility enhance energy security, while expanded renewable deployment contributes to sustained emission reductions. Over time, these developments support a more climate-resilient, secure and sustainable energy system that advances macro-regional and European climate and energy goals.

Indicators:

- increasing share of renewable energy across the macro-region
- growth in the share of renewables and cross-border energy projects contributes to measurable CO<sub>2</sub> emission reductions in the Baltic Sea Region
- more resilient and flexible energy systems that reduce vulnerability to climate-related disruptions

Policy Areas Energy Action 2:

**Strengthen regional energy market integration and interconnectivity to improve system stability and resilience**

### **Addressed challenges**

The Baltic Sea Region faces growing challenges in maintaining energy security and system resilience due to geopolitical disruptions, aging infrastructure, and increasing shares of variable renewable energy. Russia's invasion of Ukraine underscored the urgency to reduce dependency on external suppliers and strengthen internal energy solidarity. Simultaneously, the green transition demands rapid decarbonisation, greater electrification, and system flexibility. Fragmented energy markets, uneven infrastructure development, and limited interconnectivity between some Baltic Sea Region countries hamper efficient energy exchange, threaten energy affordability, and reduce the region's ability to respond to crises or climate-induced disruptions. There is a need to foster a well-integrated regional energy market, regional interconnectivity,

enhancing energy system stability, resilience, and sustainability in the long term. No single Baltic Sea Region country can independently secure energy resilience or optimal market functioning in an interconnected grid, but robust and well-functioning national grids and markets are prerequisites for regional resilience and market functioning. Further integration enables better use of renewable potential across borders, more competitive pricing, and coordinated emergency responses, under the condition that national grids and markets are fit for purpose. Enhanced interconnectivity, particularly via electricity and gas interconnectors, supports the Strategy's objectives of sustainability, prosperity, and security. A common regional approach will strengthen trust, promote investment, and allow for joint planning and efficient resource use.

A critical added value is provided by BEMIP (Baltic Energy Market Interconnection Plan), which already functions as the main EU coordination platform for energy integration in the region. This Action will build on and complement BEMIP by linking its technical and infrastructure focus with broader Strategy's objectives, ensuring that interconnection and market integration also deliver on climate, security, and socio-economic priorities. The combination of the Strategy and BEMIP provides a powerful framework to accelerate the green transition while strengthening solidarity and resilience.

#### **Needed outcomes**

The Action will promote harmonised regulatory frameworks, market rules, and system operations across Baltic Sea Region countries to enable deeper market coupling. It will support the development and modernisation of cross-border infrastructure (e.g., interconnectors, offshore grids) and help remove bottlenecks to physical and regulatory integration. The Action also targets enhanced coordination of national transmission system operators (TSOs) and energy regulators to facilitate operational and planning cooperation. Key outcomes include:

- increased physical interconnectivity and cross-border capacity
- improved alignment of national energy market frameworks
- greater system flexibility and resilience to both climate risks and geopolitical pressures
- a regulatory environment that enables faster deployment of renewable energy sources and grid integration

By complementing BEMIP's work on infrastructure and market coupling, the Action will ensure that systemic challenges such as climate adaptation, social acceptance, and skills development are integrated into regional energy planning and solutions.

As a result, the outcomes focus on improving regulatory and operational alignment, expanding interconnectivity and reinforcing the system's flexibility and ability to withstand both geopolitical and climate-related pressures.

Indicators:

- more national and regional policies reflecting shared priorities for cross-border interconnectivity and market integration
- regional Transmission System Operators adopt coordinated grid planning procedures aligned with EU integration goals
- increased number and/or capacities of transnational energy interconnectors

- funding programmes increasingly supporting cross-border energy infrastructure and system-integration priorities
- climate resilience and mitigation integrated into regional energy strategies through targets on grid flexibility, renewable integration, and reduced system emissions across the Baltic Sea Region

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes support long-term improvements by enabling a more efficient, resilient and integrated regional energy system. As cross-border infrastructure expands and market rules become more aligned, the region benefits from improved energy flows, strengthened system stability and enhanced capacity to integrate renewable energy. Increased interconnectivity and coordinated planning reduce vulnerability to supply shocks, lower market fragmentation and support a more efficient use of regional resources. Over time, these developments contribute to a more resilient and competitive energy market, reduced emissions through stronger renewable integration and improved protection of populations and infrastructure from climate-related disruptions.

Indicators:

- increased share of renewable energy in the Baltic Sea Region energy mix, as reported by Eurostat and national energy agencies, indicating long-term structural shifts towards decarbonisation
- reduced wholesale price differences of energy resources in the region
- reduced greenhouse gas emissions through improved cross-border integration and system efficiency
- more resilient energy systems with fewer climate-related disruptions and improved continuity of service

Policy Areas Energy Action 3:

### **Strengthen energy efficiency**

#### **Addressed challenges**

The EU has committed to reduce final energy consumption by at least 11.7% by 2030 compared to 2020 projections. However, many Member States in the Baltic Sea Region are lagging in implementing effective and coordinated energy efficiency (EE) measures, particularly across sectors such as buildings, transport, and industry. The urgency stems from growing energy demand, geopolitical instability affecting supply, and the need to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Achieving energy efficiency targets is not only key to meeting climate obligations but also to reducing energy poverty, increasing competitiveness, and enhancing energy security. Energy systems in the Baltic Sea Region are interdependent. Inefficient use of energy in one country affects the entire regional grid, markets, and overall resilience. Coordinated efforts are necessary to address shared challenges such as retrofitting building stock, deploying smart grids, and exchanging best practices across borders. Macro-regional cooperation under the EUSBSR enables aligned implementation of national energy and climate plans (NECPs), promotes knowledge transfer, and leverages synergies in funding, technologies, and regulatory frameworks.

These challenges highlight the importance of macro-regional cooperation to accelerate energy efficiency

improvements and support long-term sustainability.

### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires more aligned national and regional policy frameworks that support the systematic adoption of energy efficiency measures and strengthen the capacity of authorities and stakeholders to implement them. Shared approaches to building renovation, smart energy use and demand-side management can help improve performance across sectors. Facilitating cooperation and peer learning supports the development of integrated, efficient and climate-responsive solutions, while stronger regulatory and procurement practices help accelerate the uptake of energy-efficient technologies and services. Increased awareness among businesses and consumers encourages behavioural change and more efficient energy use. As a result, the outcomes focus on policy alignment, the introduction of improved practices, strengthened stakeholder engagement and the integration of climate-mitigation and adaptation considerations into energy efficiency actions.

Indicators:

- more national or regional authorities integrated energy efficiency targets from NECPs to its national plans
- stakeholders across Baltic Sea Region countries independently adopt Action-aligned practices, strategies or behavioural campaigns
- new macro-regional guidelines developed to harmonise energy performance requirements in public procurement
- funding programmes increasingly supporting energy efficiency priorities and cooperation across the macro-region
- climate-mitigation and climate-adaptation considerations more strongly integrated into energy efficiency planning and policy development

This Action will support systemic and behavioural changes to meet the EE targets set in the NECPs by:

- promoting harmonised implementation of the Energy Efficiency Directive (EED) across the Baltic Sea Region, including the new provisions adopted in 2023
- facilitating peer learning and cooperation between national and local authorities on public building renovation, smart energy use, and demand-side measures
- supporting integrated solutions through pilot projects that combine energy efficiency with renewable energy and digitalisation
- raising awareness among businesses and consumers to foster behavioural shifts toward energy conservation
- encouraging the uptake of energy performance contracting, building energy management systems, and green public procurement

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes support long-term improvements by reducing overall energy consumption, strengthening resilience and lowering emissions across the macro-region. As more efficient technologies and practices are adopted and regulatory frameworks become more aligned, energy intensity decreases, fossil-fuel exposure



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Further changes are possible until publication as  
The European Commission Staff Working Document*

diminishes and energy systems become more flexible. Improved performance in buildings and infrastructure enhances resilience to climate-related risks, while greater demand-side efficiency contributes to long-term sustainability and affordability. Over time, these developments support a more secure, competitive and climate-aligned energy system, contributing to macro-regional and European climate and energy objectives.

Indicators:

- increase in the share of final energy consumption covered by energy efficiency measures in the Baltic Sea Region
- downward trend in energy intensity (energy/GDP) between 2025 and 2030 in at least five Baltic Sea Region countries
- reduced greenhouse gas emissions associated with lower energy demand

## Policy Area Hazards – Preventing and reducing pollution and tackling legacy pollution

Hazardous substances and contamination threaten ecosystems, water quality and human health across the Baltic Sea Region. It is one of the main pressures on the Baltic Sea and a main driver of biodiversity loss. The macro-region faces pressures from ongoing emissions, legacy pollution and new types of contaminants, while fragmented monitoring, regulation and knowledge limit effective prevention and remediation. Climate change adds to the cumulative pressure. Macro-regional cooperation strengthens alignment between policies for upstream and downstream measures, for monitoring and risk management, supports shared learning and improves the capacity of authorities and stakeholders to prevent and reduce pollution.

Actions:

- Prevent pollution and reduce the use of hazardous substances
- Mitigate new and remediate historic contamination

Policy Area Hazards Action 1:

### Prevent pollution and reduce the use of hazardous substances

#### **Addressed challenges**

Hazardous substances remain a significant pressure on the Baltic Sea Region, part of a triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Persistent chemicals such as per- and poly fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS,) pharmaceutical pollutants and microplastics accumulate in the environment, affect biodiversity and pose long-term risks to human health. Micropollutants are regulated through a number of EU legislation such as the REACH regulation, the Urban Wastewater treatment directive (UWWT), the Water Framework directive and the Environmental quality standards directive.

Per- and poly fluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), the so-called “forever chemicals” due to the fact that they do not break down in the natural environment, is used in consumer products, industrial processes, pesticides, and firefighting foam. Some PFAS substances and uses are restricted in the EU under the REACH regulation and other environmental and human health specific legislations. PFAS group is identified among the HELCOM priority substances in 2025 that are posing the highest anticipated risk to the Baltic Sea.

Pharmaceuticals and their effects on the environment and microplastics are regulated through different EU legislation, making implementation complex. New legislative frameworks and proposals stipulate new monitoring requirements, but in some cases, there is a lack of data and guidance.

There is a growing volume of microplastics found in the environment, and once in the environment, microplastics do not biodegrade (unless specifically designed to do so) and tend to accumulate. There are concerns about its impact on the environment, biodiversity and potentially human health, but we lack knowledge due to no continuous monitoring of microplastics. New monitoring requirements have been introduced in the revised EU UWWT directive. HELCOM proposes to assess if regulations for products and processes releasing both primary (intentionally added) and secondary microplastics (unintentional

microplastic releases, e.g. from larger plastics breaking down) are enough.

Implementation of existing EU and regional legislation and requirements remains uneven, and many authorities face gaps in monitoring, data and guidance for risk assessment. Technical, research and methodological support is needed to manage hazardous substances effectively. Awareness raising is needed at national, regional and local level, industries and the general public on PFAS and chemicals management as a part of the solution to address the triple crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. Youth could support amplifying efforts in awareness raising.

These challenges highlight the need for more preventive, coordinated and capacity-building approaches across the macro-region, as well as reconciling upstream and downstream measures

### **Needed outcomes**

These challenges require responses that strengthen upstream prevention, improve the ability of authorities to implement EU and HELCOM measures, and support wider adoption of sustainable and circular chemical management practices. Better coordination, practical guidance and shared learning help public authorities reduce pollution at the source, while improved procurement and risk-management practices support behavioural change across municipalities, utilities and businesses. As a result, the outcomes focus on strengthening implementation capacity, improving practical tools and enabling the transfer of effective solutions across the macro-region.

Indicators:

- organisations increased their institutional capacity to implement EU directives regarding urban wastewater treatment, pollution prevention and circular products and procurement due to macroregional cooperation
- organisations increased their institutional capacity to implementing national actions in the HELCOM Baltic Sea Action Plan (BSAP) related to hazardous substances due to macroregional cooperation.
- effective practices and solutions for prevention, mitigation and substitution are transferred across borders and taken up by administrations
- number of events, studies, projects organized or started that consider climate change in their description

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes support long-term reductions in hazardous substances entering the Baltic Sea and contribute to healthier ecosystems and communities. As prevention, risk-management and implementation capacity improve, pollutant loads decrease, environmental quality strengthens and regional assessments reflect progress in reducing chemical pressures. Over time, these system-level improvements underpin a safer, more resilient and sustainable Baltic Sea Region.

Indicators:

- less PFOS in the Baltic Sea Region<sup>12</sup>
- less DICLOPHENAC in the Baltic Sea
- less Beach litter in the Baltic Sea Region
- positive trend in the integrated contamination status of the Baltic Sea

## Policy Area Hazards Action 2:

### Mitigate new and remediate historic contamination

#### Addressed challenges

Historic contamination from industrial activities accumulated in soil and sediments, hazardous substances in marine wrecks as well as in items deliberately dumped to the Sea, such as munitions, continues to pose environmental and safety risks and contamination of sediments across the Baltic Sea Region. Fragmented responsibilities, limited guidance and lack of knowledge on remediation of underwater emissions hinder coordinated assessment and prioritisation of polluted areas and submerged objects, while challenges linked to nutrient recycling and sludge contamination complicate circular economy efforts. Climate change further increases uncertainty, and there is a lack of knowledge in how it influences contaminants stored in sediments and accelerates the degradation of submerged materials.

At the same time, contaminants from wastewater end up in sludge and prevent recycling, since food producers and other parts of the industry do not want to use the sludge or soil improvement products derived from it, because of the risk of having hazardous substances ending up in the soil and farm field. Policy Area Hazards will collaborate with Policy Area Nutri on nutrient recycling, contributing also to HELCOM BSAP E33.

Policy Area Hazards will furthermore support knowledge building, studies or case studies on the effects of new generation fuel on the marine environment. It is an under-researched area, and crucial since the washing procedures of chemical tankers causes wash water to leak into the sea, causing potential leakages of bio-oil and other substances. Actions will complement Policy Area Maritime Safety actions.

These challenges highlight the need for stronger coordination, better knowledge and improved preventive and remedial approaches across the macro-region.

#### Needed outcomes

These challenges require tailor-made responses that improve the identification and prioritisation of contamination sources, build capacity for coordinated action and strengthen the evidence base for safe mitigation and remediation. Enhanced monitoring and shared risk assessment approaches help national and regional authorities target the most pressing pollution sources, while stronger cooperation supports practical progress on contaminated sediments, munitions and wrecks. Policy Area Hazards will support the HELCOM work on hot spots to this end.

The circular economy approach offers the possibility to develop measures and practical solutions to both

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<sup>12</sup> This indicator is under revision to include more PFAS substances. The new indicator will replace the old indicator but will still be somewhat comparable.

getting rid of chemicals and other harmful pollution, recycling nutrients and other (raw) materials to be (re)used in the production streams.

As a result, the outcomes focus on improving knowledge, strengthening policy implementation and enabling effective, transferable solutions.

Indicators:

- more HELCOM sea-based hot spots for contaminated sediments, wrecks and munitions are identified/cleaned up
- more programme priorities and calls designed to support the HELCOM work on sea-based hot spots for contaminated sediments, wrecks and munitions
- increased knowledge on climate change effects on chemicals stored in sediments and on decomposition of munitions
- effective prevention, mitigation and remediation practices are transferred across borders and adopted by relevant administrations

#### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes support long-term reductions in environmental contamination, strengthen ecosystem health and reduce the risks posed by both historic and emerging pollutants. As monitoring and remediation capacity improve, the Baltic Sea Region becomes better equipped to prevent, manage and recover from contamination threats. Over time, these developments contribute to healthier ecosystems, reduced environmental hazards and greater resilience to climate-driven changes in contamination pathways.

Indicators:

- less damage to the marine environment from oil spills
- decreasing cumulative impact from physical pressures on benthic biotopes

## **Policy Area Health – Strengthening population, well-being and crisis resilience**

Health and well-being are essential to the Baltic Sea Region's resilience, social cohesion, prosperity and sustainable development. Our region faces shared challenges, including demographic pressures, rising mental and physical health concerns, health inequities and varying capacities across health systems. Cross-border health threats, climate-related risks, and inconsistent emergency preparedness further expose vulnerabilities, while differing capacities and institutional approaches reduce coherence. Macro-regional cooperation supports shared learning, promotes healthier and more inclusive societies and strengthens the preparedness of people and communities for crises.

Actions:

- Strengthen community resilience through improved physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing
- Strengthen institutional and stakeholder capacity to address regional health challenges

## Policy Area Health Action 1:

### Strengthen community resilience through improved physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing

#### **Addressed challenges**

Populations across the Baltic Sea Region face a combination of demographic, environmental and societal pressures that undermine health and resilience. Rapid population ageing increases demands on health and social systems, while rising levels of mental distress and loneliness, particularly among young people, older adults and those affected by conflict, signal growing vulnerability. Non-communicable diseases remain the leading cause of mortality despite being largely preventable, and antimicrobial resistance continues to threaten regional and global health security. These challenges are compounded by climate change, which amplifies physical and mental health risks through extreme weather events, disrupted ecosystems, and reduced well-being. Recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, revealed how quickly systems can become overstretched and how unevenly communities can recover. Taken together, these pressures highlight the need for stronger, more integrated approaches that support people's physical, mental, emotional and social resilience and ensure that communities are better able to withstand and adapt to future shocks.

#### **Needed outcomes**

Responding to these challenges requires action that improves collaboration among health systems, communities and institutions, strengthens cross-sectoral approaches, and expands access to effective preventive and supportive measures. Better coordination across health, education, labour, culture and civil protection systems can help embed health considerations in wider policy processes and ensure a more coherent response to shared challenges. Wider uptake of innovative and evidence-informed approaches, including community-based health promotion models, arts- and culture-supported well-being initiatives, and preventive measures addressing risky health behaviours, supports healthier lifestyles and reduces the avoidable burden on health systems.

Drawing on lessons from crisis-affected areas, such as Ukraine, strengthens preparedness systems and ensures that mental and physical well-being is systematically integrated into all resilience planning processes. As a result, the outcomes focus on expanding preventive and supportive practices, enhancing cross-sectoral cooperation and strengthening the capacity of communities and institutions to promote health and resilience.

#### Indicators:

- at least three innovative, community-based wellbeing and mental health models developed in the Baltic Sea Region are adopted and scaled through national programmes or EU frameworks, including approaches aligned with Health in All Policies and the Economy of Wellbeing, thereby contributing to social cohesion and resilience
- at least two new community-based or cross-sectoral initiatives (e.g. Arts on Prescription, age-friendly practices, alcohol and drug policy innovations) are launched with Policy Area Health support by 2030

#### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes contribute to long-term improvements in individual and community resilience by

promoting healthier lifestyles, increasing preventive capacity and strengthening systems' ability to respond to emerging health risks. As integrated and community-based approaches become more widespread, mental well-being improves, preventable disease burdens decrease, and populations are better prepared to cope with physical, emotional and environmental stressors. Stronger cross-sectoral coordination also enhances preparedness for future crises, reduces inequalities in access to support and contributes to more cohesive, productive and adaptable societies. Over time, these system-level improvements help increase healthy life years, strengthen social resilience and support sustainable prosperity across the Baltic Sea Region.

Indicators:

- healthy life years
- life expectancy
- self-perceived health among people aged 16 years or over
- reported prevalence of depression and anxiety among young people

Policy Area Health Action 2:

## Strengthen institutional and stakeholder capacity to address regional health challenges

### **Addressed challenges**

Across the Baltic Sea Region, health systems and communities face mounting pressures that threaten social resilience and long-term well-being. Ageing populations, rising mental distress, and unequal access to healthcare and social services are placing greater demands on public systems.

Workforce shortages, budget constraints, and gaps in cross-sector cooperation limit institutions' capacity to respond effectively. Although the region has strong traditions in social innovation, workplace well-being, substance use control, and community-based health promotion, these strengths are unevenly distributed and not yet fully integrated into broader governance structures.

At the same time, emerging risks, including health impacts from environmental crises, new psychoactive substances, and the long-term social consequences of large-scale events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, require more coordinated action and stronger institutions.

These challenges signal the need for more coherent governance, better cross-sectoral integration, and stronger capacity among authorities, civil society, and service providers to support resilient, healthy communities.

### **Needed outcomes**

These challenges call for responses that strengthen governance structures, align policies across sectors, and improve the capacity of institutions, workplaces, and communities to promote physical, mental, and social well-being. Improved coordination helps embed Health in All Policies approaches, ensuring that education, labour, culture, youth and climate strategies incorporate health considerations. Shared learning and cooperation enable stakeholders to scale up successful models such as Arts on Prescription, workplace-based prevention, and healthy ageing initiatives. Strengthening institutional capacity also supports the development

of forward-looking alcohol, tobacco, and substance-use policies, while structured cooperation with Ukraine provides valuable experience in resilience under crisis.

As a result, the outcomes focus on improving governance, expanding innovative and community-based approaches, and reinforcing cross-sectoral capacity to address health challenges across the region.

Indicators:

- health considerations are more consistently integrated into sectoral policies and resilience strategies across the region, with Health in All Policies and Economy of Wellbeing approaches informing cross-sectoral policy dialogue and joint Policy Area actions
- funding programmes show greater alignment with priorities that address population and community health outcomes
- stakeholders engaged in Policy Area Health demonstrate strengthened capacity for regional public health diplomacy, as reflected in joint statements, coordinated positions, and collective contributions to the Baltic Sea Region and European policy processes
- by 2035, environmental health risks related to biodiversity loss, pollution, and extreme weather events will be systematically addressed through strengthened regional health cooperation

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes help build healthier, more resilient societies by strengthening institutions' and stakeholders' capacity to prevent illness, reduce inequalities, and respond to new and emerging risks. As cross-sectoral governance becomes more coherent and innovative practices are adopted more widely, communities benefit from better mental health support, safer workplaces, healthier ageing and more effective responses to substance use. Over time, these system-level shifts increase healthy life years, reduce avoidable morbidity and strengthen social cohesion and productivity. A more coordinated and capable health ecosystem also improves preparedness for future shocks, including climate-related impacts and crises affecting physical and mental well-being.

Indicators:

- increases in healthy life years and measurable improvements in mental, physical, and social well-being across the region
- reduced disparities across Baltic Sea Region countries, reflected in the convergence of key health and wellbeing indicators, including self-reported mental health, life satisfaction, and premature mortality, by 2035
- enhanced crisis preparedness and adaptive capacity through stronger institutional cooperation

## **Policy Area Innovation – Supporting transformative innovation policies and actions aiming at tackling common macro-regional challenges**

Innovation is essential to the macro-region's competitiveness, resilience and ability to manage climate, digital and demographic transitions. Yet uneven innovation performance, fragmented ecosystems, varying research and entrepreneurial capacities and limited cross-border cooperation hinder the development and scaling of

new solutions. Differences in policy approaches and uneven uptake of advanced technologies widen regional disparities, while actors struggle to access knowledge, resources and collaboration networks. By pooling expertise, resources and innovation capabilities, Baltic Sea Region countries can tackle shared challenges more effectively than through isolated efforts. Coordinated action strengthens regional strengths, aligns policies and delivers more impactful solutions, boosting competitiveness and sustainable growth across the macro-region.

Actions:

- Tackling common challenges through place-based innovation
- Leveraging digital transformation to address common challenges
- Accelerating growth and the triple transition by connecting business and innovation ecosystems

Policy Area Innovation Action 1:

## Tackling common challenges through place-based innovation

### Addressed challenges

Cities and regions across the Baltic Sea Region face environmental, social and economic challenges that demand stronger place-based innovation. Regulatory and administrative barriers, fragmented governance and uneven innovation capacity limit collaboration and slow the scaling of solutions across borders. Innovation divides between urban and rural areas hinder progress on climate adaptation, clean energy, circular economy transitions, digitalisation, mobility and safety and resilience, while opportunities in the maritime environment, blue economy and smart urban–rural development remain underused. Place-based innovation also plays a crucial role in responding to demographic and social transitions. Active community engagement and social innovation are essential to ensure inclusive, sustainable transformation. Macro-regional cooperation can unlock this potential by aligning local and regional ecosystems with societal needs and strengthening the region’s overall competitiveness.

### Needed outcomes

To address these challenges, countries and regions require more coordinated innovation governance and broader uptake of place-based approaches. Better alignment of local, regional and national innovation strategies strengthens the ability of actors to work together and scale solutions across borders. Wider use of place-based innovation methods helps cities and regions design responses tailored to their local assets while contributing to macro-regional priorities. Strengthened cross-border cooperation enables the sharing of practices, joint piloting of solutions and more effective use of regional innovation ecosystems. As a result, the outcomes focus on improving policy alignment, enhancing cooperation and expanding the use of innovation approaches that support climate, digital and demographic transitions.

Indicators:

- local and regional authorities adopt new smart city, smart village or smart specialisation strategies explicitly integrating place-based innovation approaches and supporting macro-regional and cross-border cooperation

- introduction of new approaches, practices and networks for macro-regional and cross-border cooperation between local/regional authorities in the Baltic Sea Region, facilitating data sharing, joint pilots, or innovation funding schemes
- increased number of Baltic Sea Region regional or local development strategies explicitly integrating climate adaptation and mitigation measures through macro-regional or cross-border place-based innovation approaches (e.g., smart cities, circular economy, resilient infrastructure)

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes strengthen the macro-regional capacity to deliver innovative solutions to common challenges. As cooperation deepens, local and regional ecosystems become better connected, accelerating the diffusion of new practices and technologies. Wider adoption of place-based innovation approaches supports climate adaptation, digital transformation and resource-efficient development. Over time, these system-level changes help reduce innovation divides, increase the competitiveness and resilience of local and regional economies and enhance the region's ability to respond to emerging social, environmental and economic pressures.

Indicators:

- number of regional innovation ecosystems implementing place-based pilots (e.g. smart city or maritime innovation) that scale into commercial solutions, boosting regional competitiveness
- increase in employment in place-based innovation sectors—clean energy, circular economy, digital health, maritime—especially in rural and underdeveloped areas
- increased contribution of Baltic Sea Region cities and regions to climate neutrality through place-based innovation, measured by reduced GHG emissions from sectors such as shipping, energy, and urban transport, and by expanded local renewable energy and carbon storage solutions
- by fostering place-based innovations e.g. in renewable energy, sustainable urban planning, and nature-based solutions, Action 1 will reduce climate-related damages such as floods and droughts and lower heat-related mortality

Policy Area Innovation Action 2:

## **Leveraging digital transformation to address common challenges**

### **Addressed challenges**

Digital transformation is rapidly reshaping the Baltic Sea Region, offering major opportunities to improve public services, strengthen competitiveness and advance climate and sustainability goals. Yet uneven digital readiness—ranging from gaps in broadband access and digital skills to fragmented regulations and technical standards—limits the ability of public authorities, citizens and businesses to benefit from new technologies. These divides hinder interoperability, restrict cross-border digital services and risk widening socio-economic inequalities. At the same time, the region faces growing needs related to cybersecurity, data governance and the responsible use of AI and emerging technologies. By fostering collaboration, strengthening trust and aligning with EU frameworks, digital transformation can be turned into a driver of sustainable growth, resilience and competitiveness for citizens, businesses and public authorities across the macro-region.

### **Needed outcomes**

Responding to these challenges requires outcomes that strengthen the ability of authorities, businesses and communities to adopt and apply digital solutions in a coherent and coordinated way. Expanding digital infrastructure, improving skills, supporting interoperability and promoting responsible digitalisation help reduce divides and enable more effective access to services. Improving alignment across strategies and encouraging wider use of digital approaches support competitiveness, inclusion and climate-responsive development. As a result, the outcomes focus on improving coherence in digital practices, encouraging broader uptake of digital tools and reinforcing approaches that integrate climate considerations into digital transformation.

Indicators:

- new approaches, practices and networks for cross-border digital service interoperability.
- number of national, regional or local authorities adopting new guidelines on ethical AI use and cybersecurity
- wider uptake of digital tools by businesses to improve efficiency and service delivery
- funding bodies increasingly reflect priorities related to digital skills, interoperability and responsible use of digital technologies
- number of Baltic Sea Region municipalities integrating digital climate solutions (e.g. digital twins, e-mobility, flood monitoring) into local planning or service delivery
- number of national, regional or local digital strategies in the Baltic Sea Region integrating climate mitigation/adaptation measures (e.g. smart energy, resilient infrastructure)

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes contribute to long-term improvements by strengthening the macro-region's digital preparedness, competitiveness and resilience. As coherent digital practices become more widely adopted, the digital economy grows, cross-border digital activity increases and public authorities, businesses and communities gain improved access to digital opportunities. Over time, these system-level developments support productivity, innovation, inclusion and climate-related objectives, creating a more cohesive and competitive digital ecosystem across the macro-region.

Indicators:

- increased share of digital economy in Baltic Sea Region GDP
- higher small and medium enterprises (SME) participation in cross-border digital trade
- by advancing digital solutions such as smart grids, AI-enabled energy efficiency, and optimized transport systems, Action 2 contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions
- by enabling digital early-warning systems, smart infrastructure, and climate data platforms, Action 2 will lower damages from floods and droughts

### Policy Area Innovation Action 3:

## Accelerating growth and the triple transition by connecting business and innovation ecosystems

### Addressed challenges

Business and innovation ecosystems across the macro-region play an important role in driving sustainable economic activity, yet many remain constrained by fragmented policies, uneven coordination and differences in access to resources. Collaboration across borders is often limited by support infrastructures that focus mainly on national or regional priorities and lack the tools or capacities to operate transnationally. Differences in the availability of funding, skills and organisational capacity further reduce opportunities for joint co-creation, while gaps in shared digital platforms, interoperable testbeds and data frameworks restrict collaboration and slow ecosystem development. These conditions make it more difficult for the macro-region to take full advantage of the green, digital and social transition. These challenges highlight the need for outcomes that strengthen collaboration, improve alignment and support more coherent development of business and innovation ecosystems across the macro-region.

### Needed outcomes

Responding to these challenges requires approaches that strengthen transnational cooperation, improve alignment of strategies and support wider participation of business and innovation actors. Better coordination across ecosystems enables more efficient use of resources and strengthens the ability of SMEs to co-create solutions across borders. Supporting more consistent policy approaches helps reduce fragmentation, while strengthened knowledge exchange increases the uptake of good practices. As a result, the outcomes focus on improving cooperation among business and innovation ecosystems, strengthening policy alignment, and reinforcing the capacity of SMEs and clusters to participate in cross-border value-chain development linked to the triple transition.

### Indicators:

- new approaches, practices and networks in the Baltic Sea Region promoting measures for transnational SME co-creation
- new practices enabling cross-border value chain cooperation adopted by Baltic Sea Region clusters or business support organisations
- more EU, national or regional funding programmes adapting programming or calls, adjusting budget allocations or introducing synchronized calls to support cross-border SME co-creation and ecosystem collaboration
- increasing number of clusters or SME networks adopting new green innovation practices (e.g. on circular economy, low-carbon production, climate-smart services)

### Expected impact

Together, the outcomes contribute to long-term improvements by strengthening interconnected business and innovation ecosystems and supporting their role in macro-regional transformation. As cooperation expands and strategies become more aligned, SMEs gain better access to networks, markets and knowledge,

contributing to sustained growth and competitiveness. Stronger cross-border collaboration helps accelerate the triple transition by supporting the uptake of sustainable, digital and socially oriented innovations. Over time, these system-level developments increase the macro-region's ability to generate resilient value chains, support climate-neutral economic activity and respond more effectively to shared challenges.

Indicators:

- Growth in the number of SMEs/startups engaged in regional innovation ecosystems, clusters, and cross-border pilots in Baltic Sea Region priority sectors
- Shorter average time-to-market for new products in Baltic Sea Region innovation ecosystems
- Sustainable innovations contribute to long-term emission reductions and climate-neutral development
- Innovation in climate-smart industries supports more resilient value chains and reduces climate-related risks

## Policy Area Maritime Safety – Strengthening safe, resilient and sustainable maritime operations

The Baltic Sea is one of the world's busiest and most sensitive maritime areas. High traffic volumes, evolving technologies, emerging fuels and increasingly unpredictable environmental conditions heighten navigational risks and place pressure on safety systems. Differences in national approaches to risk management, preparedness, search and rescue cooperation and competence development reduce coherence across the macro-region and limit the ability to prevent and respond to incidents. Macro-regional cooperation strengthens shared understanding of risks, supports more consistent safety practices and enhances the capacity of authorities and stakeholders to address complex challenges.

Actions:

- Enable reliable and safe navigation conditions
- Develop navigation in ice to meet future challenges
- Enable efficient traffic management and implement maritime services
- Ensure accurate preparedness and response for maritime accidents and security incidents

Policy Area Maritime Safety Action 1:

### Enable reliable and safe navigation conditions

#### **Addressed challenges**

Safe navigation in the Baltic Sea depends on accurate marine data, coherent maritime services, well-functioning human resources, and the ability to respond to emerging security risks. Although much of the region has been surveyed with modern methods, gaps remain in a few areas that are important for commercial shipping, and in many areas used by leisure crafts, search & rescue, etc. and for contingency. Fragmented national approaches to maritime infrastructure and services make navigation less predictable for

users and reduce efficiency across the macro-region. Human factors add further pressures, as fewer seafarers come from the region and seafarers spend shorter periods at sea, increasing the need for strong competence development and a safe and supportive working environment. At the same time, new security-related challenges require more coordinated and up-to-date practices. These developments underscore the need for more harmonised implementation of modern maritime standards, better cooperation across borders, and strengthened conditions that support safe navigation in a changing operating environment.

### **Needed outcomes**

These challenges call for outcomes that improve the consistency, reliability and safety of navigation across the macro-region. More harmonised adoption of modern maritime standards enhances predictability for users, while better alignment of national solutions strengthens interoperability and reduces operational risks. Improved surveying practices contribute to a clearer and more accurate picture of the marine environment, and enhanced human-centred measures ensure that competence, wellbeing and safety culture remain strong pillars of navigation. Together, these outcomes reinforce the macro-region's ability to deliver safe, efficient and climate-responsive maritime transport.

Indicators:

- number of S-100 standards implemented in a harmonized way in the Baltic Sea Region
- number of countries completing BSHC (Baltic Sea Hydrographic Commission)-HELCOM resurvey, Category II
- improved national legislation to simplify bathymetric surveying. e.g. use of unmanned survey vessel (USV)
- more EU funding programmes tailored to foster innovations on enabling reliable and secure navigational conditions
- number of funding programs having projects supporting this action within the Policy Area Maritime Safety
- the maritime services proposed enable ships to carry more goods without increasing the risks, improving the factor of CO<sub>2</sub>/tonnes of goods

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes support long-term improvements in navigational safety and efficiency across the macro-region. As modern standards and harmonised practices become more widely used, the maritime sector benefits from clearer information, more predictable operations and reduced risk of accidents. Strengthened working conditions and sustained competence development enhance the human element of safety, while coordinated measures that account for environmental and security-related changes improve resilience. These system-level advances contribute to a safer and more efficient maritime space, reduce environmental risks associated with navigation, and reinforce the reliability of maritime transport as a backbone of macro-regional connectivity and prosperity.

Indicators:

- reduced environmental impact by preventing accidents
- more effective maritime transportation of goods due to better information sharing. Less waiting times

- at ports, and fewer stops during voyage
- less emissions due to better traffic management
- no increase in accidents even with offshore wind farms installed, thanks to traffic management and common risk management. Comparison between 2026 and 2030
- improved resilience of maritime transport systems to environmental and security-related disruptions

## Policy Area Maritime Safety Action 2:

### Develop navigation in ice to meet future challenges

#### **Addressed challenges**

Navigation in ice is undergoing significant change as warming temperatures shorten the average ice season while creating more variable and demanding conditions, including increased movement of ice and more frequent ridging. These developments coincide with the rapid expansion of offshore energy, which introduces new interactions between winter navigation and sea-based infrastructure. At the same time, fewer vessels are designed for heavy ice, and existing policies and operational practices have not yet adapted to the emerging conditions. Because ice moves across national boundaries, reliable winter navigation requires coordinated approaches to ensure continuity of transport flows that are essential for industry, supply chains and mobility across the macro-region. These combined pressures highlight the need for updated knowledge, aligned policies and renewed cooperation.

#### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires more coordinated winter navigation systems that reflect changing ice dynamics and new offshore activities. Countries need shared understanding of evolving conditions, more aligned approaches to planning and risk management, and better integration of winter navigation considerations into sea-based energy development. Closer cooperation supports continuity of transport, increases preparedness for climate-driven variability, and strengthens the resilience of ports and shipping routes during winter. As a result, the outcomes focus on improving policy alignment, strengthening shared knowledge and ensuring that planning and operational frameworks evolve in pace with environmental change.

#### Indicators:

- new national policies on the co-existence of Off-Shore Windfarms and Winter Navigation, within national and regional Maritime Spatial Planning
- increased awareness among actors in the sea-based wind energy industry of the Winter Navigation needs and challenges
- increased efficiency due to information exchange between icebreakers and ports. More port authorities and shipowners have refined / updated their processes in relation to ice navigation
- better knowledge on changing ice conditions and current traffic limitations in order to optimize the icebreaker numeral, sizes and operation
- relevant EU funding programmes tailored to foster innovations for navigation in ice
- number of funding programs having projects supporting this action within the Policy Area Maritime Safety

- better integration of climate-related considerations into winter navigation practices and regulation
- adapted icebreaking services based on the climate changes' and offshore wind farms' effects on ice

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes enable winter navigation systems that remain reliable, predictable and safe despite changing ice conditions and new offshore developments. More coordinated approaches help maintain the accessibility of ports, secure the movement of essential goods and support the resilience of supply chains across the macro-region. As winter navigation becomes better adapted to climate change, shipping can operate more smoothly, reducing unnecessary delays and environmental impacts. These long-term improvements strengthen the macro-region's ability to sustain efficient, climate-responsive maritime transport throughout the winter season.

### Indicators:

- minimise the number of port closures in wintertime. The goal is zero closure for defined winter ports.
- no increases in annual average waiting time for icebreaker assistance
- reduced environmental impact of navigation in ice:
  - no oil spills during icebreaking operations
  - less waiting time, leading to less CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.
- optimizing routing through ice to enable "smooth" operation (steady speed, no extra stops)

## Policy Area Maritime Safety Action 3:

### Enable efficient traffic management and implement maritime services

#### **Addressed challenges**

Maritime infrastructure and services across the macro-region remain fragmented, with separate national approaches creating inconsistencies for users and operational risks. As digital standards evolve, many maritime services are only now becoming feasible to implement, yet national uptake varies and slows progress toward more coordinated solutions. Growing traffic volumes and the presence of vessels with uncertain technical reliability heighten the need for shared approaches that improve situational awareness and support just-in-time arrivals. Ensuring modern, harmonised traffic management is therefore essential for safer navigation, more efficient transport flows and reduced environmental impacts. These pressures highlight the need for outcomes that strengthen cooperation, support common implementation practices and enhance the use of emerging maritime services across the macro-region.

#### **Needed outcomes**

Improving traffic management and implementing maritime services requires more coordinated approaches that align national practices, support shared policy development and strengthen the uptake of modern digital standards. Harmonised implementation enables smoother operations for users, reduces risks and supports wider adoption of solutions that enhance safety and environmental performance. Strengthened cooperation also ensures that new services and standards are understood and applied consistently, while broader awareness of the benefits of a common operational picture helps drive behavioural change across the maritime sector. As a result, the outcomes focus on aligning approaches, improving knowledge and enabling

broader use of traffic-management practices across the macro-region.

Indicators:

- updated HELCOM-recommendation on implementation of e-Navigation
- number of projects implementing the updated HELCOM-recommendation on e-Navigation
- increased awareness of the benefits of a common operational picture in the Baltic Sea
- relevant EU funding programmes tailored to foster innovations for traffic management and implementation of maritime services
- number of funding programs having projects supporting this Action within the Policy Area Maritime Safety
- traffic management may help ships adjust their speed and save CO<sub>2</sub>, and is essential in Action 2: Navigation in ice

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes contribute to long-term improvements in maritime safety and environmental performance by enabling more coordinated development and use of shared services. As traffic-management practices become more aligned and widely implemented, navigation becomes safer, operational predictability increases and efficiencies strengthen the contribution of maritime transport to the macro-regional economy. Over time, improved routing and speed management help reduce emissions, while broader and more consistent availability of maritime services supports a more resilient and modern maritime space. These system-level changes underpin lasting improvements in safety, sustainability and reliability across the macro-region's maritime sector.

Indicators:

- number of ships using Just-in-Time arrival in the region
- usage and availability of updated International Maritime Organisation Maritime services in the Baltic Sea Region
- traffic management will reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions through optimised routes and speeds
- no increase in accidents even with Offshore Wind Farms installed, thanks to Traffic Management and common risk management

Policy Area Maritime Safety Action 4:

**Ensure accurate preparedness and response for maritime accidents and security incidents**

### **Addressed challenges**

The Baltic Sea's sensitive ecosystem, dense maritime traffic and extensive transport of fossil fuels create a high-risk environment where accidents can have wide-reaching and long-lasting consequences. Passenger traffic across the macro-region adds further complexity, requiring preparedness for incidents involving large numbers of people. Evolving geopolitical conditions, new fuels, offshore installations and changing technologies continually reshape the risk landscape, demanding regular updates to response strategies.

Effective preparedness further depends on strong cross-border cooperation, as major spills or passenger incidents inevitably affect multiple countries. These challenges highlight the need for more coordinated approaches, updated response capacities and improved readiness across the macro-region.

### **Needed outcomes**

These challenges call for strengthened cooperation among response authorities, broader alignment of national practices and wider uptake of updated procedures that reflect new fuels, climate risks and emerging maritime activities. Improving shared situational awareness and cross-border preparedness helps ensure timely, coordinated responses to major accidents. Expanding joint exercises and collaborative planning allows authorities to test and refine collective capabilities. Together, these measures reinforce system-wide preparedness and support safer navigation across the Baltic Sea.

Indicators:

- increased number of response aspects covered by recurring coordination meetings
- improved national legislation to simplify monitoring of spills. e.g. USV
- number of cross-border exercises regarding any aspect of response
- relevant EU funding programmes tailored to foster innovations for ensuring accurate preparedness and response for maritime accidents and security incidents
- number of funding programs having projects supporting this action within the Policy Area Maritime Safety Expected impact

By improving coordination, response capacity and readiness across the macro-region, the outcomes support more effective management of maritime accidents, reducing environmental impacts and strengthening safety at sea. As preparedness systems become more aligned and adaptive, authorities are better equipped to respond to evolving risks, including those linked to climate change, new fuels and offshore structures. Over time, these system-level improvements help safeguard the Baltic Sea environment, enhance maritime security and reinforce resilience across the macro-region.

Indicators:

- reduced environmental damage from maritime accidents through more coordinated and timely response
- more coherent cross-border preparedness systems providing improved capability to manage large-scale incidents
- increased resilience of maritime emergency systems facing evolving risks linked to climate change, new fuels and offshore installations
- increased use of low-emission fuels supported by preparedness systems capable of responding safely to fuel-related incidents

## **Policy Area Nutri – Reducing nutrient pollution to the Baltic Sea**

Nutrient pollution remains one of the most persistent environmental pressures in the Baltic Sea Region. Excess nutrient loads drive long-term eutrophication, affect ecosystem health and undermine progress

toward shared environmental objectives. Emissions originate from multiple sectors and vary across countries, and differences in national approaches, planning and capacities slow coherent progress. Climate-related changes and land-use dynamics add further pressure on water systems, while varying capacities to address pollution from both diffuse and point sources limit the effectiveness of reduction efforts. Macro-regional cooperation supports shared learning, strengthens coherence across policies and practices and helps countries coordinate more effective approaches to nutrient reduction.

**Actions:**

- Reduce nutrient emissions from agriculture and other diffuse sources
- Reduce nutrient emissions from wastewater treatment
- Develop and promote safe and sustainable nutrient recycling

**Policy Area Nutri Action 1:**

**Reduce nutrient emissions from agriculture and other diffuse sources**

**Addressed challenges**

Diffuse nutrient inputs remain a major pressure on the Baltic Sea, where excessive nutrient loads contribute to eutrophication, reduced biodiversity, and long-lasting degradation of water quality. While point source reductions have progressed, diffuse sources from agriculture and upper catchments continue to drive nutrient losses, and their management remains uneven across the macro-region. Climate change increases runoff and accelerates processes such as internal loading. Many existing practices that could reduce these pressures are not widely adopted, and progress is slowed by fragmented cooperation, varied advisory capacity, land-use factors, and knowledge gaps on long-term nutrient dynamics. These interconnected challenges signal the need for outcomes that strengthen cooperation, broaden the uptake of sustainable practices and improve knowledge underlying macro-regional action.

**Needed outcomes**

To address these challenges, outcomes are needed that support stronger cooperation across actors influencing nutrient management, encourage wider use of practices that reduce diffuse losses, and improve knowledge on nutrient pathways and climate-related effects. Aligning efforts across the macro-region enables actors to coordinate priorities, exchange experience and develop approaches that contribute to long-term improvement of water management, soil health and sustainable land use. Together, these outcomes help move the system toward more coherent action on diffuse nutrient sources and climate-adaptive nutrient management.

**Indicators:**

- improved experience exchange between different organisations, farmers and young farmers lead to increased implementation of measures reducing nutrient loading by year 2035
- number of international or cross-sectoral initiatives (projects, events, networks) referencing Policy Area Nutri or facilitated by it, which promote nutrient reduction measures by year 2035
- improved knowledge about internal loading and about adaptation to climate change through better management and reduced nutrient loading by year 2035

- funding calls or programmes (e.g. Interreg, CAP) reference or prioritise nutrient reduction from agriculture and diffuse sources in line with Policy Area Nutri objectives by year 2035
- alignment of funding to the identified key target groups: young farmers, farmer and advisory organisations (included in projects or targeted through events) by year 2035 Promotion of climate-smart water management practices that reduce nutrient runoff from agriculture, such as constructed wetlands, controlled drainage, and grassed buffer strips

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes support structural change by improving how land-based activities contribute to nutrient reductions across the macro-region. As knowledge strengthens and more coherent practices are taken up, nutrient losses decrease, and water management becomes more climate resilient. Over time, these shifts raise the effectiveness of measures addressing diffuse sources and contribute to long-term recovery of the Baltic Sea. The impacts reflect how macro-regional coordination and strengthened practice lead to sustained environmental improvements and more climate-adaptive land and water systems.

Indicators:

- reduced nutrient inputs to the Baltic Sea
- reduced nutrient and greenhouse gas emissions resulting from sustainable land use practices
- improved climate-resilient water management that reduces flood- and drought-related impacts

Policy Area Nutri Action 2:

## **Reduce nutrient emissions from wastewater treatment**

### **Addressed challenges**

Nutrient discharges from wastewater treatment continue to contribute to eutrophication in the Baltic Sea, even though substantial progress has been made in reducing point-source pollution. Remaining challenges relate to improving sludge and stormwater management, strengthening treatment in small and seasonally pressured municipalities, and addressing industrial wastewater. Progress is uneven across the macro-region, with differing levels of compliance and varying capacity to implement updated requirements. Stricter standards and expanding responsibilities place new demands on actors, while climate change increases the need for resilient solutions that reduce overloads and support energy-efficient treatment. These challenges highlight the need for more coherent cooperation, wider uptake of effective practices, and better alignment of policies to reduce nutrient emissions in a sustainable and climate-adaptive manner.

### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires more coordinated implementation of wastewater policies, better exchange of knowledge across governance levels, and broader use of practices that improve treatment performance, support circular approaches, and integrate climate considerations. Strengthening cooperation enables authorities and operators to identify shared issues, support consistent implementation, and accelerate the uptake of innovative solutions. As a result, the outcomes focus on enhancing multilevel cooperation, improving understanding of challenges and opportunities, and encouraging broader adoption of measures that reduce nutrient emissions while supporting climate mitigation and adaptation.

Indicators:

- objectives of the revised Urban Wastewater Directive addressed in multilevel dialogues supported by Policy Area Nutri by year 2035
- integrated stormwater management is well-known and practiced in urban areas around the region
- cooperation with nearby regions, especially the Lviv-region, and other macro-regional strategies improves solution uptake by year 2035
- alignment of funding (new platforms, projects) and increased funding possibilities available for projects supporting or prioritizing the Action and possibly organising synchronized funding calls by year 2035
- improving how climate aspects such as energy efficiency of treatment plants and circular solutions are taken into account by year 2035

**Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes contribute to long-term improvements in water quality and climate resilience by enhancing the capacity of wastewater treatment systems to reduce nutrient discharges and operate more sustainably. As cooperation strengthens and effective practices become more widely adopted, the macro-region benefits from more consistent treatment performance, reduced pressures on the marine environment, and wastewater treatment systems that are better adapted to changing climatic conditions. These shifts support sustained reductions in nutrient inputs, improved climate-smart operations, and fewer pollution events linked to extreme weather, thereby contributing to a healthier Baltic Sea.

Indicators:

- reduced nutrient inputs to the Baltic Sea
- increased adoption of energy-efficient and circular wastewater treatment practices contributing to climate mitigation
- increased nutrient and water reuse help with adaptation to droughts
- implementation of integrated stormwater management solutions result in fewer wastewater overflows

Policy Area Nutri Action 3:

**Develop and promote safe and sustainable nutrient recycling**

**Addressed challenges**

Inefficient use of phosphorus and nitrogen continues to contribute to nutrient inputs into the Baltic Sea, as nutrient-rich side streams from agriculture, wastewater treatment and industry are not fully utilised in a safe and efficient manner. Uneven distribution of nutrients leads to over-enrichment in some areas and insufficient availability in others, while competition with mineral fertilisers limits wider uptake of recycled alternatives. Although many technical solutions exist, concerns related to safety, logistics and low acceptance slow their adoption, and limited policy support and data availability further constrain progress across the macro-region. Existing frameworks provide direction, yet implementation differs among countries and experience exchange remains insufficient. These challenges highlight the need for more coordinated

approaches that strengthen policy development, encourage cooperation across sectors and support wider adoption of safe and sustainable nutrient recycling practices.

### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires efforts that improve policy alignment, strengthen macro-regional cooperation and promote solutions that enable nutrient-rich side streams to be safely and efficiently returned to productive use. Better coordination across the macro-region can support the identification of common needs, increase knowledge exchange and encourage wider uptake of nutrient recycling practices in line with shared objectives. Greater visibility of nutrient recycling in national and macro-regional policy discussions helps advance the development of appropriate incentives and enhance market uptake. Collaboration across sectors further ensures that solutions reflect the diverse sources and users of recycled nutrients and that climate-related benefits, including reduced reliance on virgin materials and improved soil management, are more consistently realised.

Indicators:

- promote nutrient recycling to national and EU policies and facilitate identification and implementation of relevant policies by year 2035
- uptake of better solutions for nutrient recycling through joint cross-sectoral efforts in the Baltic Sea Region by year 2035
- contribute to progress of implementing HELCOM's Baltic Sea Regional Nutrient Recycling Strategy objectives and actions by year 2035
  
- structural exchange with relevant bodies such as funding programmes with the aim to include nutrient recycling related topics in line with Policy Area Nutri action objectives to the funding themes, objectives and/or calls by year 2035
- alignment of funding (new platforms, projects) and funding possibilities available for projects supporting the Action by year 2035
- greater integration of climate aspects into policy and stakeholder discussions on nutrient recycling by year 2035

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes contribute to long-term improvements in how nutrients are managed across the macro-region by supporting wider adoption of practices that reduce losses to the environment and strengthen circular resource use. As nutrient recycling becomes more embedded in policies and practices, inputs to the Baltic Sea decrease, dependence on virgin materials diminishes and soil management practices become more sustainable. Over time, these system-level changes support both climate mitigation through reduced demand for energy-intensive fertiliser production and climate adaptation through improved soil health and resilience.

Indicators:

- reduced nutrient inputs to the Baltic Sea. Through encouragement of wider use of recycled fertilisers soils and their carbon storage are improved leading to long-term carbon and nutrient emission reductions

## Policy Area Secure – Strengthening societal resilience and crisis preparedness

The Baltic Sea Region faces a wide range of interconnected risks that affect the safety, resilience and stability of societies. These risks are heightened by uneven capacities for prevention and preparedness, and fragmented approaches to assessing and managing crises. Differences in national systems, varying access to information and diverse levels of citizen and community readiness further affect the region’s ability to anticipate and respond effectively to disruptions. Macro-regional cooperation strengthens shared understanding of risks, improves alignment of preparedness approaches, promotes knowledge sharing and innovation and supports efforts to build more resilient societies.

### Actions:

- Strengthen disaster resilience through joint capacity building for authorities and reduction of shared vulnerabilities
- Empower citizens as active participants in a whole-of-society resilience approach
- Harnessing research, development and innovation for societal security

### Policy Area Secure Action 1:

## Strengthen disaster resilience through joint capacity building for authorities and reduction of shared vulnerabilities

### Addressed challenges

Governments across the Baltic Sea Region face increasingly interconnected risks stemming from geopolitical instability, climate-related hazards, pandemics, and cyber and hybrid threats. These pressures cut across borders and levels of government, exposing uneven capacities, fragmented approaches and gaps in the structured exchange of knowledge, skills and experience. Differences in institutional resources, limited interoperability, and varying levels of preparedness make it harder for authorities to anticipate, manage and recover from multi-hazard crises that affect multiple countries at once. The absence of durable networks and sustained cooperation mechanisms weakens trust, slows coordinated action and limits the uptake of proven methods. These challenges underline the need for strengthened joint capacities, more harmonised practices and deeper cross-border cooperation to reduce shared vulnerabilities.

### Needed outcomes

Responding to these challenges requires outcomes that reinforce the ability of authorities to work together, build a common societal security culture and ensure that tested approaches are more widely adopted. Strengthened cross-border cooperation and regular joint training create the conditions for improving interoperability, aligning procedures and embedding shared terminology into daily practice. Broader participation of local and regional authorities, NGOs, academia, private-sector actors and youth contributes to more inclusive and well-connected preparedness structures. As a result, the Action focuses on improving

joint learning, deepening networks between practitioners and integrating climate-related risks into multi-hazard preparedness to support long-term resilience.

Indicators:

- percentage of civil protection authorities reporting improved cross-border communication and coordination capabilities
- number of new methods or best practices adopted by the civil protection/crisis preparedness actors as a result of joint knowledge-sharing initiatives
- number of national policy documents informed by the Baltic Sea Region regional cooperation outputs
- funding programmes referencing this Action's themes in published calls
- policy Area Secure-facilitated projects under this Action that receive funding and total external funding secured

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes contribute to a more coherent and interconnected crisis-management system across the macro-region, by connecting societal security professionals in the Baltic Sea Region into a durable web of contacts and cooperation. As cooperation becomes more routine and shared approaches are embedded in institutions, authorities can act faster and more consistently during emergencies, reducing the societal and economic impacts of disasters. Strengthened trust, improved communication and expanded networks support more efficient prevention, preparedness and response, while the systematic integration of climate-related risks enhances long-term resilience to evolving hazards. Over time, these shifts will help create a safer and more secure Baltic Sea Region.

Indicator:

- enhanced citizen trust in government crisis management within 5-year period

Policy Area Secure Action 2:

## **Empower citizens as active participants in a whole-of-society resilience approach**

### **Addressed challenges**

Communities across the Baltic Sea Region face growing exposure to crises driven by climate change, health emergencies, technological disruptions and hybrid threats. Yet the contribution citizens can make to resilience remains underused due to uneven awareness, limited access to actionable information, differences in trust in authorities and varying traditions of public participation. Vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected, and authorities continue to prioritise institutional responses over inclusive engagement. Because risks, information flows and behaviours transcend borders, fragmented approaches limit preparedness and complicate communication when crises unfold. These shared challenges highlight the need for more coherent citizen engagement, better alignment of communication and preparedness practices, and stronger common societal security culture across the macro-region.

### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires outcomes that normalise cooperation between citizens and authorities, strengthen the ability of governments to engage communities constructively, and expand the uptake of inclusive and climate-aware preparedness practices. Shared approaches to risk communication, joint development of methods and guidance, and more systematic exchange across authorities and communities help turn participation into a routine element of crisis management. Strengthening capacities at local and regional level supports the practical application of these approaches, while cooperation across borders ensures consistent messages and mutual learning.

Indicators:

- percentage increase in public participation in preparedness activities (e.g., training, events, awareness raising campaigns) within 5 years
- percentage of Baltic Sea Region governments with improved structures/mechanisms for integrating public participation in preparedness policy within 5 years
- funding programmes referencing this Action's themes in published calls
- policy Area Secure-facilitated projects under this Action that receive funding and total external funding secured
- stronger integration of climate-related risks into the planning and delivery of activities under this Action

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes strengthen the societal foundations of resilience by improving how people understand risks, respond to crises and cooperate with authorities. As citizen engagement becomes a sustained element of policies and practices, communities act more proactively, trust in institutions deepens and authorities benefit from reduced pressure during emergencies. Over time, this contributes to a more cohesive crisis-management culture across the Baltic Sea Region, where informed and prepared citizens support more effective prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

Indicator:

- higher levels of public preparedness for crises across the macro-region

Policy Area Secure Action 3:

## **Harnessing research, development and innovation for societal security**

### **Addressed challenges**

Research, development and innovation are essential for long-term societal security in the Baltic Sea Region, yet cooperation remains fragmented, and too few results are translated into daily practice. Cross-sector collaboration between authorities, research institutions and private actors is uneven, knowledge-transfer mechanisms differ widely, and access to sustainable funding and quality infrastructure varies across the macro-region. These gaps slow the adoption of solutions needed to address climate-driven disasters, pandemics, cyber and hybrid threats. As risks intensify and grow more interconnected, the region requires shared knowledge frameworks and stronger collaboration to align agendas, accelerate innovation and

support evidence-based action. These challenges create the need for outcomes that strengthen cross-sector RDI cooperation, improve knowledge transfer and embed research-supported approaches into decision-making and crisis-management routines.

### **Needed Outcomes**

Responding to these challenges requires wider uptake of research-informed approaches, improved cooperation between academia, authorities, businesses and NGOs, and better mechanisms for translating knowledge into policies, training and operational practice. Stronger cross-sectoral partnerships help build shared learning cycles, while joint development efforts support the adoption of solutions that advance crisis prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. As a result, the outcomes focus on strengthening the regional knowledge base, supporting joint development of innovative methods and tools, and reinforcing pathways that ensure RDI outputs become integrated into institutional processes and competencies.

Indicators:

- growth of cross-sectoral RDI networks and partnerships
- policy changes reflecting scientific findings on resilience and preparedness
- funding programmes referencing this Action's themes in published calls
- policy Area Secure-facilitated projects under this Action that receive funding and total external funding secured
- percentage of Policy Area Secure activities within this Action (events, trainings, exercises, projects) whose planned outcomes explicitly integrate climate-related risks for the Baltic Sea Region

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes support a shift toward a more coordinated and innovation-driven societal-security ecosystem, where research findings, new methods and cross-sector cooperation strengthen resilience across the macro-region. As evidence-informed approaches become routine, authorities and communities gain improved tools to anticipate, mitigate and recover from crises, while businesses and infrastructure operators benefit from shared knowledge and innovation. Over time, system-level improvements translate into reduced damages from disasters and wider use of security innovations that enhance the region's long-term safety and resilience.

Indicator:

- long-term reduction of damages and losses from crises as research-based approaches become integrated into practice

## **Policy Area Ship – Advancing environmentally sustainable shipping**

Shipping is a major contributor to environmental pressures in the Baltic Sea, including emissions to air, inputs to water, underwater radiated noise and impacts on biodiversity. The scale and cross-border nature of maritime traffic create shared challenges; while varying national regulations, infrastructure readiness and operational practices lead to uneven progress towards sustainability. Technological developments, emerging

alternative fuels and evolving environmental requirements add complexity and require coherent approaches across the macro-region. Macro-regional cooperation strengthens shared understanding of impacts, supports consistent approaches, and enables stakeholders to reduce pressures from shipping more effectively.

Actions:

- Support development of an environmentally sustainable shipping sector
- Support research on challenges related to current shipping practices and their impact on the marine environment and its biota
- Support development of shore-side facilities to enable sustainable shipping practices

Policy Area Ship Action 1:

## Support development of an environmentally sustainable shipping sector

### Addressed challenges

Shipping is essential for the Baltic Sea Region, yet its broad range of emissions and discharges imposes significant pressure on a sensitive marine environment with limited water exchange. Greenhouse gases, operational discharges, underwater radiated noise and other pollutants intersect with the sector's reliance on diverse fuels, some of which present both opportunities and new environmental risks. Climate change adds complexity, reinforcing the need for cleaner operations while highlighting that alternative fuels must be carefully assessed to avoid unintended impacts. The macro-region's interconnected shipping routes and shared waters mean environmental pressures and mitigation opportunities are closely linked across borders. These combined challenges demonstrate the need for coordinated efforts that improve environmental performance, support policy development, and encourage sustainable solutions across the shipping sector.

### Needed outcomes

Addressing these challenges requires outcomes that strengthen the uptake of environmentally sustainable practices, better aligned policy approaches, and support the transition toward cleaner operations across the macro-region. Wider introduction of improved practices, technological advancements and alternative fuels can reduce environmental pressures, while stronger policy frameworks and shared standards create the conditions for consistent progress across countries. Integrated approaches are also needed to clarify sustainability requirements, reinforce alignment with related frameworks, and encourage coordinated implementation that supports long-term environmental improvement. These outcomes therefore focus on supporting more sustainable operational practices, enabling policy development and fostering conditions for cleaner and more resilient maritime transport.

Indicators:

- new best practices/technological advancements to improve environmentally friendly shipping are shared and implemented in the region
- stricter national policies/New HELCOM recommendations and sustainability requirements included in national transport strategies or maritime action plans in the region on topics making shipping more sustainable

- alignment of maritime fuel standards across the region to support the uptake of alternative fuels
- capacity of EU funding programmes tailored to the needs of sustainable shipping practices
- improved communications with the funding organizations to accommodate calls for the needs of sustainable shipping
- number of funding programmes having projects supported by the Policy Area Ship
- climate change mitigation policies mentioned in regulations, standards, best practices etc.

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes contribute to long-term improvements in the environmental performance of the shipping sector by supporting cleaner operations, reducing harmful discharges and strengthening the sustainability of maritime transport across the macro-region. As environmentally responsible practices and alternative fuels become more widely adopted, the Baltic Sea benefits from lower pollutant loads, improved ecosystem conditions and enhanced resilience. Over time, the sector's contribution to climate mitigation strengthens, and broader uptake of sustainable approaches supports healthier marine environments and more robust ecological services. The expected impacts are as follows.

Indicators:

- decreased emissions from shipping
- decreased amount of hazardous substances and litter entering the Baltic Sea
- lower amounts of algal blooms
- improved biodiversity-related ecosystem services due to improved condition of the Sea

Policy Area Ship Action 2:

**Support research on challenges related to current shipping practices and their impact on the marine environment and its biota**

### **Addressed challenges**

Shipping is essential for trade and connectivity in the Baltic Sea Region, yet current practices generate a wide range of emissions and discharges that affect the marine ecosystem and contribute to biodiversity loss. These pressures include greenhouse gases, underwater radiated noise, chemical substances and waste streams linked to evolving fuel and technology choices. As new technologies emerge, unexpected environmental consequences can occur, and measures designed to solve one problem may create another. Knowledge gaps remain significant, and the pace of scientific understanding does not always match the speed of technological and regulatory developments. The sector relies on credible, comparable and high-quality research to inform decision-making, guide policy adjustments and support innovation. To ensure environmentally sustainable shipping, the macro-region needs coordinated research efforts, shared data and evidence-based understanding of impacts. These challenges highlight the importance of strengthening scientific knowledge, improving information flows and ensuring that research supports practical solutions and policy development.

### **Needed outcomes**

Responding to these challenges requires outcomes that enhance the quality, relevance and availability of scientific evidence on shipping's environmental impacts, while supporting its uptake in policy, planning and

technological development. Improved knowledge enables more informed decisions by authorities, regulatory bodies and industry actors, supports adjustments to practices, and strengthens the credibility of measures introduced to reduce harmful emissions and protect the Baltic Sea ecosystem. Better coordination across scientific institutions, authorities and industry ensures that research findings can feed into strategies, inform assessments of emerging technologies and guide sustainable transition pathways.

Indicators:

- number of research papers presented to relevant bodies (e.g., IMO, HELCOM), contributing to discussions on sustainable shipping and/or informing HELCOM recommendations
- research findings referenced in national maritime strategies, sustainability roadmaps, or EU policy documents
- new initiatives use the research outputs to design or evaluate pilot projects (e.g., green shipping corridors)
- needs of the Baltic Sea Region shipping research community considered in the next EU-Framework-program in research and innovation (FP 10)
- topics or solutions explored through research included in funding calls and programmes Climate change policies affected by the research on national, EU-level and/or IMO level
- percentage of ports in the Baltic Sea region that have adopted and implemented climate adaptation strategies (e.g., flood protection systems, heat-resilient infrastructure, water management plans)

### **Expected impact**

Over time, strengthened research capacity and the broader use of scientific evidence will support more sustainable and adaptive shipping practices across the macro-region. As knowledge gaps close, authorities and industry actors can make more informed decisions, policies can be better calibrated to real environmental impacts and new technologies can be assessed more systematically. This contributes to long-term reductions in harmful emissions and pressures on the marine environment, supports the decarbonisation of maritime transport and enhances the resilience of shipping to climate-related change. The cumulative effect is a better-protected Baltic Sea ecosystem and a more sustainable maritime sector.

Indicators:

- reduced average GHG emissions per ship or per tonne-mile in the Baltic Sea region
- reduction in total SO<sub>x</sub> & NO<sub>x</sub> emissions from maritime transport in the region
- R&D investment in green maritime technologies e.g., electrification, wind propulsion
- reduction in climate-related disruption of port operations measured by number of days of port disruption per year due to climate-related events

Policy Area Ship Action 3:

**Support development of shore-side facilities to enable sustainable shipping practices**

### **Addressed challenges**

Ports and shore-side facilities in the Baltic Sea Region play a central role in supporting sustainable maritime transport, yet they face growing pressure from eutrophication, pollution and emissions linked to dense

shipping activities. The transition toward cleaner maritime operations requires ports to expand their capacity for alternative fuels, on-shore power supply and efficient reception facilities, while also navigating a complex policy landscape shaped by national, macro-regional and global regulations. Varying implementation speeds, competing interests and insufficiently harmonised approaches limit the ability of ports to provide consistent, environmentally responsible services. These challenges highlight the need for better aligned policies, coordinated development and wider uptake of sustainable practices across shore-side facilities, creating the basis for the outcomes of this Action.

### **Needed outcomes**

To address these challenges, the Action promotes more coherent development of port infrastructure, stronger alignment of shore-side procedures and broader adoption of practices that support sustainable and low-emission maritime operations. Coordinated improvements in port reception facilities, fuel-supply capabilities and port procedures help ensure that sustainable shipping options are available across the macro-region. Better policy alignment supports ports in adapting to new requirements, while shared approaches help actors navigate regulatory complexity and accelerate the transition toward cleaner maritime transport. The expected outcomes are:

Indicators:

- new best practices adopted and/or collaborative initiatives commenced (e.g., related to decarbonized ports, Green Shipping Corridors, EcoPorts) to advance sustainable maritime transport,
- implementation of streamlined procedures for e.g. shore-side electricity connections, alternative fuels etc.
  
- alignment of maritime fuel standards across the region to support the uptake of alternative fuels
- More (1 per year) EU funding programmes tailored to foster innovation in decarbonising port operations
- communications with the funding organizations to accommodate calls for the needs of sustainable shipping
- more (1 per year) EU-funded territorial cooperation projects tailored to promote clean practices in Baltic Sea seaports

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes contribute to long-term environmental improvements by reducing pollution and emissions linked to port operations and enabling cleaner maritime transport across the Baltic Sea Region. As more ports adopt sustainable and climate-adaptive practices, the macro-region benefits from reduced pressures on the marine environment, strengthened ecosystem services and a more resilient and competitive maritime sector. The expected impacts are shown through the following indicators.

Indicators:

- less nutrients in the Baltic Sea
- less hazardous substances and litter in the Baltic Sea

- reduced GHG emissions in the shipping sector
- lower amounts of algal blooms
- improved biodiversity-related ecosystem services due to improved condition of the sea

## Policy Area Spatial Planning – Strengthening coherent land- and sea-use planning for sustainable development

Spatial planning plays a central role in managing land and sea uses, land–sea interaction and supporting territorial cohesion. It serves to balance environmental, economic, and social needs. The Baltic Sea Region faces shared challenges linked to climate change, demographic and geopolitical shifts and ecosystem degradation. Differences in planning systems, uneven data availability and fragmented cooperation reduce the coherence of planning outcomes across borders. These developments call for renewed strategic coordination and deepening cooperation across regions, borders, and sectors (including security) in spatial development and planning. Macro-regional cooperation based on multi-level and cross-sectorial governance supports aligned approaches, strengthens knowledge and fosters more integrated planning that contributes to sustainable development of the region and its resilience towards multiple stressors.

### Actions:

- Increasing capacities and strengthening territorial cohesion in the Baltic Sea Region through land-based spatial planning
- Improving joint knowledge base and strengthening cohesion for ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning

### Policy Area Spatial Planning Action 1:

## Increasing capacities and strengthening territorial cohesion in the Baltic Sea Region through land-based spatial planning

### Addressed challenges

The Baltic Sea Region is shaped by rapid and interlinked developments, including demographic change, evolving societal values, climate impacts, biodiversity loss, shifts in energy systems, technological innovation and a changing geopolitical environment. These developments influence people, places and economies unevenly and highlight the need for spatial planning approaches that can respond to new forms of cooperation, territorial challenges and long-term development pressures. As land-based spatial planning is implemented at national, regional and local levels, varying capacities and fragmented practices make it difficult to ensure functional coherence across borders, including where land-sea interactions are crucial. These dynamics underscore the need for stronger shared capacities, better knowledge exchange and more coordinated territorial approaches to support cohesive development across the macro-region.

### Needed outcomes

These challenges require outcomes that strengthen how spatial planners work together across borders and governance levels, improve coherence between land-based and maritime planning, and promote approaches

that integrate climate considerations, ecosystem health and long-term territorial development in a changing geopolitical environment. Supporting practitioners through cooperation, shared methods and knowledge transfer helps create conditions where spatial planning can more effectively address cross-border issues, align practices and respond to emerging trends. As a result, the outcomes focus on enhanced capacities, improved coherence in planning approaches and stronger cross-sectoral dialogue across the macro-region.

Indicators:

- increased capacity, joint solutions, and smooth communication among spatial planning specialists of different levels
- strengthened regional cross-border spatial planning including land-sea interactions
- enhanced policy coherence addressing climate change, energy transition, pollution, biodiversity, ecosystem health and restoration, as well as security in strategic planning:
  - proposals related to Policy Area's objectives are communicated with funding sources (such as the Interreg programme for the Baltic Sea Region) for consideration in the post 2027 programme period
- developed framework (guidelines, recommendations, etc.) for strategic planning documents to consider climate resilience in spatial planning in the Baltic Sea Region

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes support long-term territorial development by enabling more coordinated spatial planning across the macro-region, improving functional coherence and strengthening the ability of authorities to address climate, ecological and socio-economic pressures. As planning systems adopt more integrated and climate-responsive approaches, decision-making becomes more resilient, territorial cohesion improves and cooperation structures become embedded across institutions. These system-level changes provide the foundation for more sustainable spatial development and better alignment of land-based and maritime uses across the Baltic Sea Region.

Indicators:

- cross-border approach including land-sea interactions is adopted throughout the region
- increased capacities of spatial planning practitioners of all governance levels
- increased awareness of spatial resilience in the Baltic Sea Region, including greater resilience to extreme weather
- increased participation in macro-regional spatial-planning cooperation mechanisms that contribute to sustained territorial cohesion

### **Policy Area Spatial Planning Action 2:**

## **Improving joint knowledge base and strengthening cohesion for ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning**

### **Addressed challenges**

Maritime spatial planning across the Baltic Sea Region has advanced significantly, yet analyses show gaps that

limit coherent and ecosystem-based decision-making. Countries face the shared need for stronger integration of the ecosystem-based approach in maritime spatial planning (MSP), which is key to balancing social and economic demands with the protection of the marine environment. It requires coordinated application of strategic environmental assessment, and consistent consideration of individual and cumulative impacts, including across borders. The absence of a common monitoring and evaluation framework reduces the ability to adjust plans to changing natural or socio-economic conditions, while land–sea interactions and pressures originating from coastal areas require more systematic integration into planning. As environmental pressures and climate-related risks intensify, these challenges highlight the need for more harmonised knowledge, shared methodologies and closer cooperation to strengthen ecosystem-based maritime spatial planning.

### **Needed outcomes**

Responding to these challenges requires outcomes that enhance coherence in how countries apply ecosystem-based approach, assess environmental effects and use shared knowledge to inform adaptive planning. More coordinated approaches to strategic environmental assessment and cumulative impact assessment help ensure that planning decisions reflect transboundary effects, while improved dialogue among practitioners and data experts supports more consistent use of knowledge and strengthens joint understanding of environmental dynamics. Integrating land–sea interactions and climate considerations further reinforces the basis for sustainable, ecosystem-based planning. Together, these outcomes enable more aligned approaches across the macro-region and support more resilient and adaptive maritime spatial planning.

Indicators:

- establishing and operationalization of regional guiding framework for the application of ecosystem-based approach in MSP
- regional framework for strategic environmental assessment, including methodology for cumulative impact assessment and mitigation measures
- operational regional dialog platforms for MSP practitioners and MSP data experts, ensuring knowledge transfer and data exchange.
- MSP data is included in the EU Digital Twin Ocean programme
- proposals related to Policy Area’s objectives are communicated with the Interreg programme for the Baltic Sea Region for consideration in the post 2027 programme period
- joint proposals of the Baltic Sea Region and other European sea regions related to sustainable ocean governance are considered by Horizon Europe programme
- regional guiding framework for the application of ecosystem-based approach in MSP supports climate-smart MSP concept
- regional framework for strategic environmental assessment, methodology for cumulative impact assessment and mitigation measures addresses climate change adaptation and mitigation
- scientifically evidenced knowledge base for climate smart MSP, addressing also energy transition in the Baltic Sea Region scale is one of the discussion points for regional dialog platforms for MSP practitioners and MSP data experts

### **Expected impact**

The outcomes contribute to long-term improvements by supporting more coherent and ecosystem-based planning across the macro-region. As shared guidance, common assessment approaches and strengthened knowledge exchange become established in national practice, maritime spatial plans better reflect environmental dynamics, climate risks and land–sea interactions. This enables more effective protection of marine ecosystems, supports sustainable economic uses and improves adaptive capacity in the face of changing conditions. Over time, these system-level shifts reinforce a more resilient and cohesive maritime spatial planning system that supports sustainable use and protection of the Baltic Sea.

#### Indicators:

- progress in consideration of areas of significant nature value and nature conservation measures in MSPs of the Baltic Sea Region (e.g. Proposals for establishing, by 2030, 30% of the Baltic Sea as marine protected areas of which 10% are strictly protected. Other effective area-based conservation measures are also considered as part of the 30%.)
- an opportunity to designate areas for offshore renewable energy is considered in all national MSPs.
- progress in consideration of areas for nature restoration measures in MSPs of the Baltic Sea Region (covering at least 20%, by 2030)
- climate change mitigation measures are integrated into the national maritime spatial plans
- ecosystem services for carbon sequestration mapped for the entire Baltic Sea Region applying best available scientific evidence
- potential climate refuge areas identified in at least 30% of national MSPs
- scenario of climate change social and economic impacts considered in maritime spatial plans

## **Policy Area Tourism – Strengthening sustainable, competitive and resilient tourism**

Tourism contributes to prosperity, cohesion and cultural vitality in the Baltic Sea Region, yet development remains uneven and vulnerable to seasonality, demographic shifts, workforce shortages and changing traveller expectations. Rural and remote destinations face accessibility and capacity challenges, while rapid digital and green transitions require new skills and more adaptive business models. Environmental pressures, climate-related risks and inconsistent approaches to sustainability affect long-term competitiveness and community well-being. Macro-regional cooperation supports shared learning, strengthens cross-border collaboration and helps destinations and businesses adopt more resilient, inclusive and sustainable tourism practices.

#### Actions:

- Strengthening competitiveness in the tourism sector in rural and remote areas
- Securing a skilled workforce and promoting year-round tourism opportunities
- Promoting sustainable and regenerative tourism practices

## Policy Area Tourism Action 1:

### Strengthening competitiveness in the tourism sector in rural and remote areas

#### **Addressed challenges**

Rural and remote areas across the Baltic Sea Region face long-standing disparities that limit their tourism competitiveness, including restricted connectivity and accessibility, seasonal fluctuations, limited investment, skills gaps and uneven opportunities for innovation. These challenges weaken resilience, create obstacles for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and slow sustainable economic development, while demographic pressures and changing societal expectations further amplify the need for new approaches. As these conditions are common across the macro-region and influence cohesion, prosperity and sustainability, they call for coordinated efforts to rebalance development and strengthen tourism potential in rural and remote destinations. These shared pressures create the need for outcomes that support more competitive, resilient and sustainable rural tourism ecosystems.

#### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires wider adoption of approaches that enhance the competitiveness and visibility of rural and remote destinations, strengthen policy alignment and support the capacity of local stakeholders to participate in tourism development. More coordinated action across the macro-region enables authorities, SMEs and destination management organisations (DMO) to benefit from shared knowledge, improve strategic planning and pursue models that enhance economic resilience. Strengthened cooperation also helps rural areas integrate sustainable and climate-responsive practices into tourism development, allowing them to adapt to evolving demand while safeguarding natural and cultural assets.

#### Indicators:

- number of national, regional and local policies incorporating transport connectivity and digital transformation solutions by 2030
- annual growth in the number and diversity of stakeholders, including SMEs, DMOs and policymakers, actively participating in regional cooperation initiatives, forums, and projects of the Policy Area Tourism
- increase in the utilisation and alignment of regional and EU funding opportunities for tourism-related digitalisation and connectivity projects and strengthened recognition of tourism within funding priorities
- increased adoption of low-carbon transport options in rural tourism areas

#### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes will strengthen rural and remote tourism destinations as engines of sustainable development, making them more resilient to economic changes, better connected within the macro-region and more capable of offering high-quality visitor experiences. Over time, these structural improvements support more balanced territorial development, broaden the economic base of rural communities and reinforce long-term competitiveness. As sustainable and climate-responsive approaches become embedded in tourism development, rural destinations become more adaptable, diversify their offer and contribute more

actively to macro-regional cohesion and prosperity. Growth in tourism arrivals to previously underserved regions.

Indicators:

- low-Carbon Transport: Measurable increase in the development and promotion of for example: cycling and boating infrastructure, such as dedicated trails, facilities, and services, within rural and remote tourism areas
- technology adoption: Measurable increase in availability and usage of digital platforms and tools by SMEs to enhance climate adaptation

Policy Area Tourism Action 2:

## Securing a skilled workforce and promoting year-round tourism opportunities

### Addressed challenges

Tourism across the Baltic Sea macro-region faces persistent workforce shortages, uneven skills supply and strong seasonality, which together reduce competitiveness and strain the long-term resilience of destinations. Many areas experience fluctuating visitor flows, limited employment stability and challenges in attracting and retaining qualified staff, while skills systems often do not fully match evolving market needs. These pressures are shared across borders and affect the sustainability of tourism enterprises, the quality of services and the development prospects of rural and coastal destinations. The sector's exposure to seasonal peaks also places additional pressure on natural and cultural assets, making it increasingly important to diversify demand and promote all-year tourism. These interconnected challenges create the need for outcomes that strengthen workforce availability, improve skills structures and support more balanced and year-round tourism development across the macro-region.

### Needed outcomes

To respond to these challenges, the outcomes focus on improving the conditions for a stable, skilled and adaptable tourism workforce while promoting wider uptake of practices that support year-round tourism. Better cooperation among education providers, labour-market actors and tourism organisations helps align skills development with emerging needs, supported by coordinated approaches to training, mobility and professional pathways. At the same time, stronger collaboration across borders and governance levels supports the diversification of tourism offerings and the spread of approaches that reduce seasonal pressure on destinations. Together, these changes enable more coherent policies, broader capability among stakeholders and planning that reflects long-term sustainability, including climate-related considerations.

Indicators:

- improved availability and quality of skilled workforce in the tourism sector through enhanced training, upskilling, and labour market matching across the Baltic Sea Region
- growth in innovative and digital solutions supporting year-round tourism operations, capacity-building, and workforce resilience in rural and remote destinations
- increase in the utilisation and alignment of regional and EU funding opportunities for year-round tourism and skills development projects, making use of relevant and applicable EU programmes (e.g.

Interreg, ESF+)

- more climate knowledge in workforce - tourism training curricula integrating climate adaptation and mitigation modules to be tracked biannually until 2030

### **Expected impact**

Over time, the outcomes contribute to a more resilient tourism ecosystem across the Baltic Sea macro-region, where destinations benefit from a stronger skills base, more stable employment patterns and more balanced visitor flows throughout the year. As the sector increasingly integrates long-term planning, climate-aware practices and sustainable business models, tourism becomes better positioned to support local economies, reduce pressure on natural assets and sustain high-quality services. These system-level changes reinforce the competitiveness and adaptability of destinations and strengthen the contribution of tourism to the macro-region's long-term development.

Indicators:

- growth in year-round tourism employment rates based on EU data dashboard
- increase in tourism-related GDP in participating regions based on EU data dashboard
- growth in tourism arrivals to previously underserved regions
- increasing availability of year-round tourism products in the Baltic Sea Region that integrate climate-friendly practices

Policy Area Tourism Action 3:

## **Promoting sustainable and regenerative tourism practices**

### **Addressed Challenges**

Tourism in the Baltic Sea Region faces growing pressures as destinations work to balance economic activity, environmental sustainability and social responsibility. Peaks in visitor numbers place strain on natural ecosystems and cultural assets, while other areas remain underutilised and lack the capacity to attract visitors sustainably. These patterns contribute to seasonality challenges, uneven development and greater risks for vulnerable natural areas. At the same time, many businesses already applying sustainable and regenerative practices are not fully equipped to communicate their efforts effectively, especially as regulatory expectations evolve. Together, these conditions highlight the need for more coordinated approaches, stronger uptake of regenerative practices and improved capacity across the tourism ecosystem, creating the basis for the outcomes.

### **Needed Outcomes**

Meeting these challenges requires approaches that strengthen how tourism actors apply and communicate sustainable and regenerative practices, encourage balanced development across destinations and support tourism models that contribute positively to local communities and ecosystems. Better alignment between tourism policies and regenerative principles helps create clearer guidance, while broader uptake of low-impact, community-oriented and restorative practices improves the long-term viability of destinations. Enhanced cooperation and shared learning support stakeholders in adapting their operations and building confidence in sustainable communication. As a result, the outcomes focus on wider use of regenerative

approaches, improved policy coherence and stronger engagement of tourism actors across the macro-region.

Indicators:

- at least two regional or national tourism policies incorporate regenerative tourism principles
- increased number of DMOs, SMEs, and organizations actively implementing regenerative practices
- at least one EU support program better aligned to fund regenerative tourism initiatives in the Baltic Sea Region
- regenerative and climate-smart practices integrated into projects and activities supported within the Policy Area

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes enable a structural shift toward tourism models that actively support ecological restoration, strengthen local economies and enhance community well-being. As regenerative practices become more widely embedded, destinations experience more balanced visitor flows, reduced pressure on natural and cultural assets and deeper integration of sustainability in tourism development. These changes contribute to long-term improvements in environmental stewardship, social benefits and economic resilience across the Baltic Sea Region.

Indicators:

- increase in employment opportunities linked to sustainable tourism initiatives
- measurable increase in GDP from tourism-related activities in the Baltic Sea Region
- number of tourism-related activities meeting EU climate-neutral targets

## **Policy Area Transport – Enhancing multimodal, emissions-free, innovative and resilient transport**

Transport is the pivotal part of the Baltic Sea Region’s supply chains. However, transport faces pressures from geopolitical instability, hybrid threats, climate change and uneven infrastructure development. Digitalisation and the uptake of clean transport technologies advance at different speeds across the region, limiting efficiency and slowing the shift toward emission-free mobility.

Actions:

- Increase development of resilient and sustainable transport in the North-South transport corridors in the Baltic Sea Region and beyond
- Strengthen measures towards climate-neutral transport in the Baltic Sea Region
- Facilitate innovative transport solutions in the Baltic Sea Region

## Policy Area Transport Action 1:

### Increase development of resilient and sustainable transport in the North-South transport corridors in the Baltic Sea Region and beyond

#### Addressed challenges

The North–South transport corridors face increasing pressures from geopolitical instability, hybrid threats, climate change and persistent infrastructure gaps, which together reduce the resilience, efficiency and sustainability of transport flows across the Baltic Sea Region and beyond. Crises highlight vulnerabilities in supply chains, expose the remaining dependence on fossil-fuel-based transport modes and demonstrate the need for harmonious transboundary logistics as well as investments. As connectivity is intertwined with developments in neighbouring countries, including Ukraine, strengthening its functionality and sustainability is essential for reliable transboundary mobility. In addition, the corridors' infrastructure is increasingly exposed to climate-related stresses such as extreme weather events, flooding risks in ports and coastal areas, heat-induced disruptions to rail and road networks, as well as increasing turbulence affecting aviation. These challenges signal the need for outcomes that improve coordination, resilience and sustainability across all transport modes.

#### Needed outcomes

The challenges call for improved management of the North–South transport corridors, ensuring that infrastructure and policies support resilient, emission-free and multimodal transport. Enhanced alignment of national approaches enables coherent development across borders, while harmonised procedures help streamline cross-border flows and support digital, cybersecure and sustainable freight practices. Outcomes focus on coordinated strategies, wider uptake of multimodal and emission-free or low-emission solutions and improved efficiency along the corridors. Increased policy alignment and transboundary relations support resilient North–South transport corridors, including linkages to neighbouring non-EU partners.

#### Indicators:

- adoption of harmonized administrative procedures for multimodal and cross-border transport along the North-South axis by public and private stakeholders
- agreement on the introduction of digital bilateral transport permits with third countries within the Baltic Sea Region
  - North-South corridors integration reflected in updated transport strategies, including extended linkages to Ukraine, the European Arctic and the EU neighbourhood, in funding calls, or coordination mechanisms at national and macro-regional levels
- funding programmes (e.g., Interreg programme for the Baltic Sea Region, CEF) and budget allocation to support multimodal transport solutions in the North-South corridors
- calls for proposals explicitly integrate Policy Area Transport priorities, promoting synchronized and coordinated funding for transport related projects
- increased investments from ERDF in resilient transport infrastructure support uninterrupted and cybersecure cross-border connectivity and economic cohesion
- deployment of green infrastructure supports climate-neutral transport systems

- and increase the use of digital tools for accurate emissions monitoring, enhancing climate mitigation efforts

### **Expected impact**

Together, the outcomes support long-term improvements that strengthen the North–South axis as a resilient, efficient and sustainable transport network. More coordinated policies and interoperable procedures create conditions for seamless freight flows and increased system reliability, while adoption of multimodal and low-emission solutions reduces the corridors environmental footprint. Modernised and climate-resilient infrastructure enhances continuity during disruptions and supports stronger economic and logistical integration across the macro-region.

Indicators:

- growth in trade volumes and freight flows along the North-South corridors, including Solidarity Lanes with Ukraine
- improved transport efficiency through optimized routes and multimodal solutions
- Baltic Sea Region as a paperless digital road permit area, enabling efficient cross-border freight operations and passenger mobility
- reduced GHG emissions via increased consumption of renewable fuels, electrification, and multimodal transport
- reduced economic losses by ensuring the continuity of critical supply chains that are resilient to climate events, hybrid threats and geopolitical disruptions

Policy Area Transport Action 2:

## **Strengthen measures towards climate-neutral transport in the Baltic Sea Region**

### **Addressed challenges**

Transport in the Baltic Sea Region remains a significant source of emissions, with uneven progress in clean mobility solutions, and fragmented approaches across countries. Shared pressures—such as energy vulnerabilities, climate-related risks, and insufficient uptake of emission-free alternatives—highlight the need for more coherent approaches to decarbonisation and pollution reduction. These challenges create a need for outcomes that strengthen alignment, support cleaner transport choices, and advance climate-neutral and zero-pollution mobility across the macro-region.

### **Needed outcomes**

Addressing these challenges requires outcomes that encourage broader alignment of national and macro-regional approaches to cut emissions and improve the conditions enabling cleaner technologies and practices to spread. Stronger policy coherence and more consistent standards together with coordinated investments help to reduce reliance on conventional fuels and support cleaner transport operations. Behavioural and institutional changes—such as wider adoption of low-emission mobility solutions and strengthened public awareness—are essential for long-term progress toward climate neutrality.

Indicators:

- progress in aligning national transport strategies to include modal shift targets towards zero- or low-emission transport modes
- new procurement guidelines introduced by national authorities prioritise zero-emission vehicle fleets in public transport tenders
- increased number of logistics operators implementing multimodal low-emission solutions, based on self-reporting and project documentation
- adoption of digitally aligned bilateral transport permits supporting low-emission cross-border transport
- mainstream funds (e.g. ERDF, ESF+, CF) mobilised by national and regional management authorities to support climate-neutral transport solutions
- public campaigns and outreach initiatives launched, resulting in increased regional cooperation, public engagement and visibility of climate-neutral and zero-pollution transport, measured through surveys or media reach

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes enable long-term transformation by accelerating the use of cleaner mobility options and reducing emissions of transport systems across the macro-region. As dependence on conventional fuels decreases and low-emission alternatives become more accessible, transport systems move steadily toward climate neutrality. Over time, the macro-region strengthens its position as a reference for collaborative and sustainable mobility transition.

Indicators:

- less transport-related emissions contribute to improved air quality and healthier communities
- wider deployment of renewable and low-emission mobility solutions across all transport modes supports progress towards climate neutrality
- broader uptake of clean transport technologies strengthens the macro-region's role as a frontrunner in sustainable mobility
- expanded electrification and renewable fuels use across all transport modes accelerates decarbonisation

Policy Area Transport Action 3:

## **Facilitate innovative transport solutions in the Baltic Sea Region**

### **Addressed challenges**

Transport systems across the Baltic Sea Region face fragmented digitalisation, uneven uptake of innovative solutions and continued reliance on practices that are not compatible with long-term climate goals. These pressures reduce transparency, efficiency and the ability to monitor and manage emissions across borders. Geopolitical instability, hybrid threats, climate change and rapid technological development amplify the urgency to strengthen cooperation so that innovation can be applied consistently throughout the macro-region. Interconnected challenges demonstrate the need for outcomes that support coherent development, wider adoption of innovative practices and stronger cross-border alignment.

### **Needed outcomes**

These challenges call for efforts that improve how public and private actors integrate innovative, digitally enabled and climate-aligned approaches into transport operations and governance. International relations and coordination across supply chains and authorities support wider uptake of digital practices that enhance data sharing, transparency and efficiency, while also enabling actors to embed emission-related considerations in decision-making. Stronger cross-sector collaboration allows innovation to spread more consistently and aligns solutions with macro-regional priorities. As a result, the outcomes focus on strengthening policy coherence, promoting broader use of innovative practices and supporting transboundary cooperation.

#### Indicators:

- deployment of digital bilateral transport permits in the Baltic Sea Region as part of smart logistics solutions, supporting paperless data exchange and more efficient cross-border procedures
- all EU Member State authorities accept eFTI via certified platforms by July 9, 2027
- new cybersecure administrative procedures are introduced by authorities for digital data exchange in transport chains
- exploration of a joint memorandum among the authorities of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland to promote wider eCMR adoption, potentially positioning the Baltic Sea Region among the first in Europe to fully implement eCMR before the official eFTI launch
- intention to encourage national governments to allocate funding for the adoption of eCMR and eFTI platforms
- GHG tracking tools independently adopted by logistics companies to improve their transparency and reporting
- budget allocated to projects deploying innovative solutions for emissions monitoring in multimodal transport
- Policy Area Coordinators contributed as advisors to ensure inclusion of digital CO<sub>2</sub> monitoring tools in transport and logistics sector

### **Expected impact**

Together, these outcomes contribute to long-term improvements, supporting more efficient logistics and strengthening competitiveness. As innovative and climate-responsive practices are embedded, transport actors are stronger at optimising operations, reducing emissions and enhancing resilience across supply chains. Over time, this contributes to a more sustainable and future-oriented transport system that improves environmental performance and supports broader development throughout the Baltic Sea Region.

#### Indicators:

- decrease in logistics costs per tonne-kilometre
- efficient and optimized supply chains
- broader long-term use of innovative and emission-free or low-emission practices in transport operations
- enhanced competitiveness of the Baltic Sea Region through more efficient routing and smoother



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Further changes are possible until publication as  
The European Commission Staff Working Document*

cross-border freight operations

- growth in the use of digital freight and renewable fuel infrastructure across multimodal transport networks
- established the Baltic Sea Region as a paperless digital road permit area, enabling efficient cross-border freight operations and passenger mobility