

# Policy Paper

## Strengthening EU Maritime Spatial Planning: towards an integrated and regionally driven future



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### Abstract

Part of the REGINA-MSP project and based upon input from the perspective of regional authorities, this policy paper provides proposals to the EU Institutions in order to enhance the effectiveness of the EU Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD), reflecting on ten years of implementation and EU policy evolution since its entry into force in 2014.

The paper addresses current challenges and exploring opportunities for regional authorities to actively participate in the MSP process, thereby maximising the directive's implementation. Building on the existing parameters of the Directive and thus following a sequential order of key articles of the MSPD, the REGINA MSP policy paper proposals aim to unlock the full potential of regional authorities, and ultimately shape a more integrated, inclusive, and multi-level future of EU Maritime Spatial Planning.

This policy paper is built upon the overall work performed within the REGINA-MSP project and especially within the work package 2 (WP2), with specific reference to:

- The **“Baseline assessment on national and regional implementation of MSP and gap analysis”** which evaluates the status of Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) implementation and identifies existing gaps in the process.
- The **REGINA-MSP Symposium**: “Shaping the future of Maritime Spatial Planning - Regional perspectives on challenges and opportunities of the development of a sustainable European Blue Economy” held on 30 April 2024 in Brussels, at the European Committee of the Regions; the Symposium was an opportunity to identify good practices and draw a wider perspective of the key role played by regional authorities MSP processes largely driven by national governments.
- The **“Compendium of regional experiences”**: A collection of various regional experiences in MSP, to capture snapshots from different countries and sea basins. Benefits for regional and local authorities, gaps, barriers and needs and the transferability potential were underlined in a cross-cutting analysis, enabling to provide a general overview of regional aspects into MSP implementation and its evolution at EU level.

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## Introduction

When it entered into force in 2014, the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD) joined the EU policy framework with the ambition to exploit the untapped potential of the world's largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) by balancing economic, social, and environmental interests in the use of EU marine waters. The MSPD promotes inclusive representation and coordinated development of maritime sectors, with EU Member States required to reflect an integrated vision of the seas in national Maritime Spatial Plans, given the flexibility to adapt to their own contexts, specificities, and ambitions on the use of the seas.

Ten years later, the EU policy landscape and objectives have shed new light on the vital role of the seas and oceans to respond to environmental, energy, climate, innovation, food security objectives and targets. While offering new opportunities for EU sustainable development and food self-sufficiency, these new common perspectives also come at a time of increasing spatial pressures that further highlight the relevance of Maritime Spatial Planning as a pivotal tool to succeed in achieving the goals of the EU's Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP).

In response to the magnitude of both challenges and opportunities on the seas, [the REGINA-MSP project](#) explored proposals to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency, coherence and added value of EU Maritime Spatial Planning, seeking how to scale the implementation of the MSPD from the delivery of technical plans into a more comprehensive, holistic, multi-level, political arbitration instrument on the future of the EU marine waters.

This policy paper builds on the existing perimeter of the Directive and follows a sequential order of key articles of the MSPD, and seeks to inform a forward-looking process that will leverage the expertise to address specific challenges and recognise realities of regional and local authorities at the heart of MSP in the future. Based upon input gathered from the perspective of regional authorities the REGINA-MSP project presents the following proposals to help realise the full potential of the EU Maritime Spatial Planning, enhance the role of EU and its coastal regional authorities as world actor in maritime sectors, and ultimately contribute to the sustainable management of EU Oceans and seas.

## I. Enhancing policy integration for a holistic achievement of the Integrated Maritime Policy

### Our key proposals at a glance

- Call on the European Commission to investigate scenarios for enhanced coordination of EU maritime policies, to reinforce both sectoral policies' synergetic potential and the implementation of Maritime Spatial Planning. *(point b.)*
- Ask the European Commission to monitor and report on the progress of integrating key sectoral targets from the EU Green Deal into the development and periodic reviews of National Maritime Spatial Plans, as a part of the implementation report expected in 2026. *(point e.)*
- Call on Member States to ensure systematic consultation with regional authorities in EU policy discussions to promote a bottom-up perspective and align with maritime-related regional priorities. *(point f.)*

While the Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP) identified Maritime Spatial Planning as the cross-cutting policy tool to achieve its objectives, the introduction of the European Green Deal (EGD) in 2019 has given new perspectives to Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) since its entry into force in September 2014. In the context of a series of EU sectoral policies and different targets, but also from the perspective of those being considered for the future, cohesive implementation of Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) could be challenged by conflicting sectoral priorities on the use of the sea being introduced by parallel policies. To meet the objective of considering *economic, social, and environmental aspects to support sustainable development and growth in the maritime sector* as outlined in Article 5, and to capitalise on the MSPD's flexibility whilst minimising the risk of compromising this approach, we propose the following:

Considering that increasing targets and ambitions for the development of offshore renewable energy, and the use of space associated with its development, will require important coordination with existing uses of the sea to discuss exclusive or shared governance of the space and compatibilities, in parallel to the assessment of environmental impacts and consideration of nature conservation, protection and restoration objectives,

Considering that the ambitions and targets set to conserve, protect and restore marine ecosystems will have an important impact on maritime spatial planning as increasing the number, size, or activities foreseen in marine protected areas oblige Member States to review the spatial redistribution of human activities, and in this respect regretting that no specific guidance or policy coordination between the MSPD and the Regulation on Nature Restoration were formally provided,

- a. We caution that addressing EU sectoral objectives separately, without sound consultation and alignment with regional authorities and their priorities that could be reflected in the MSPD processes, could hinder effective implementation, reduce public participation, and weaken a sense of ownership over Maritime Spatial Planning in the long term. We underline the risks of loss of confidence amongst users of the seas in MSP, limiting the capacity of states to undertake long-term planning, as well as risking a weakening EU citizens' social acceptance over a top-down sectoral approach.
- b. In this respect, we call on the European Commission to examine and reflect on the role and positioning of the MSPD within the broader decision-making process on EU sectoral policies impacting maritime issues. In order to frame this initiative, we recommend the European Commission to develop scenarios to strengthen interactions between EU policies that affect uses of the seas, national objectives and macro priorities at sea basin level and/or the sub-basin scale. These scenarios should go beyond maintaining the status quo and explore the potential for establishing joint coordination mechanisms or supranational bodies that could foster institutional dialogue and improve coordination between Member States and stakeholders at regional and local levels. This approach would be particularly relevant for maritime spatial planning and for the design and implementation of sectoral policies, tailored to each EU sea basin or relevant sub-regional area. Such processes may ultimately maximise coherence and alignment with the regional authorities' environmental and socio-economic realities and potential.
- c. Capitalising the MSPD adaptability that can respond to the rise of future EU challenges, we strongly underline the potential of the MSPD to become the central, bedrock instrument to address future EU targets and implementation of EU sectoral policies, with the territorial knowledge acquired via the MSP processes as the basis for reflection.
- d. Considering the multiplication of national plans required from the recent EU policies, as with the Regulation on Nature Restoration or the Regulation on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action, we recommend the European Commission addresses the risks associated with misalignments in design, reporting and monitoring, and reviewing processes in the implementation of EU sectoral policies as part of this reflection exercise. We underline that unaligned timings may weaken both EU sectoral policies' synergetic potential and the relevance of Maritime Spatial Plans, while inflicting administrative fatigue and challenges in coordination for the different competent authorities.



e. In parallel, we recommend the European Commission to monitor and report on the progress of integrating key sectoral targets from the EU Green Deal into the development and reviews of national Maritime Spatial Plans, as part of the 2026 implementation report.

f. In parallel, we encourage Member States to secure systematic consultation with regional authorities when discussing new EU sectoral policies' objectives in order to ensure the most bottom-up approach and alignment with regional priorities throughout the EU decision making process.

## II. Driving the full implementation of the ecosystem-based approach

### Our key proposals at a glance

- Call on the European Commission to deliver a proposal for a more integrated implementation of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD) and the Maritime Framework Strategy Directive (MSFD), based on existing analyses and studies and/or conducting further analysis and public consultations, with the proposal to reflect on a common set of indicators for the two Directives, embedding the socio-economic perspective of Maritime Spatial Planning with the environmental dimensions of the MSFD. *(point b., c.)*
- Invite the European Commission to analyse and acknowledge the existing co-management processes at regional and local levels as part of its reflection, where regional authorities have set up participatory approaches to address both the uses of the seas and the sustainable management of Marine Protected Areas. *(point d.)*
- Encourage Member States to appoint the same competent authorities and/or create a joint body, and at least support interactions between the authorities in charge of the implementation of MSPD and MSFD until further integration could be harmonised at EU level. *(point f.)*

The Maritime Spatial Planning Directive (MSPD) and the Maritime Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) present commonalities in process and vision. As they are both adaptative processes that address spatial distribution at sea, promote an ecosystem-based approach, and require Member States to deliver on strategies focused on the sea, we point out that mutual benefits could derive from stronger integration in implementation, and especially see the potential of the MSFD to become the environmental compass

serving the MSPD cycle. A harmonised process to foster synergies could mutually benefit the objectives of the Directives, supporting both the development of the Blue Economy and the achievement of Good Environmental Status (GES), thus enhancing the application of ecosystem-based approach to Maritime Spatial Planning. With their established role in bringing together cross-sectoral actors, regional authorities have already been central to inclusive co-reflection processes. They hold the potential to be a primary arena to strengthen policy design and application of an ecosystem-based approach.

Considering the objectives to *apply an ecosystem-based approach* outlined in Article 5 of the MSPD, and building on the momentum of the MSFD reviewing process following the European Commission's [assessment](#), we recommend the following:

- a. We underline the importance of the MSFD to provide capital data and information on the state and pressures at sea. This contributes to a critical step in the MSP process that is about understanding the current situation in the marine space being planned, gathering information about current physical, biological, social, economic and governance characteristics of the marine area,<sup>1</sup>
- b. We point out that most MSFD descriptors are closely connected to key maritime sectors that Maritime Spatial Planning addresses (e.g., fisheries and aquaculture, renewable energy, cables and pipelines, oil & gas, shipping, ports operations). As part of a joint reflection process between the two Directives, we strongly encourage the European Commission to review the descriptors to further align with MSP needs, via a common set of both environmental and socio-economic indicators. Alignment of the descriptors could make the MSFD the adequate tool to equip maritime spatial planning with the best available scientific knowledge.
- c. In this respect, we recall that the MSFD already has requirements to address socio-economic activities via an economic-social analysis of the use of waters and cost of degradation of the marine environment, which could serve as a starting point.
- d. We stress the capacity of regional authorities to establish inclusive and participatory processes with local actors and stakeholders<sup>2</sup> to address the uses of the seas and the preservation of resources and environment under the same framework. This ultimately supports regional decision-making to implement environmental protection measures that preserve economic activities which rely on healthy marine conditions and achieve GES, while avoiding impairing the sustainable development of the blue economy. We therefore invite the European Commission to take stock of the existing co-management initiatives at regional level as part of its reflection on an integrated implementation of both Directives.

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<sup>1</sup> As advised in the “Analysis of Existing Conditions”, UNESCO-IOC/European Commission. 2021. MSPglobal International Guide on Marine/Maritime Spatial Planning. Paris, UNESCO. (IOC Manuals and Guides no 89)

<sup>2</sup> As described in the REGINA MSP Compendium of regional experiences, notably within the regional experience “3.2.1.1 Brittany: a successful regional maritime experience to support multi-stakeholder cooperation (Atlantic Basin, France)”

- e. We underline that a merging between the environmental dimension of the MSFD and socio-economic perspective of the MSPD could ultimately support Member States to develop detailed measures to offset any impacts upon activities affected by the creation of Marine Protected Areas, if considered.
- f. For the MSFD to provide the most accurate and updated information on ecologically or biologically sensitive areas, current pressures, and possible conflicts between existing human uses and the environment to MSP plans, we stress the need to increase synergies between the requirements of MSFD and MSPD especially when it comes to the implementation of MSP national plans. We also encourage Member States to appoint, if possible, the same competent authority or a joint body to deal with both processes, and at least to support interactions between competent bodies, until further integration could be harmonised at EU level.

### III. Clarifying EU ambitions on co-existence and multi-use of the seas

#### Our key proposals at a glance

- Call on the European Commission to provide a clear and comprehensive definition of the concept of multi-use, which requires a higher level of integration of activities than co-existence of uses, at legislative level. *(point a.)*
- Ask the European Commission to develop technical and financial resources for national and regional authorities to both deliver and seize funding opportunities on multi-use. *(point d., e.)*
- Encourage the European Commission to facilitate knowledge-sharing on multi-use per sea basin in order to support further cross-border cooperation and exchange of innovative practice. *(point f.)*

The concept of multi-use has increasingly appeared across EU Communications within the 2019-2024 EU term, starting with the [Communication of a new approach for a sustainable blue economy](#) (2021) that expressed the ambition to promote the multi-use of marine space in maritime spatial planning. Since then, multi-use has been especially addressed through a sectoral perspective as a response to the development of offshore renewable energies, as mentioned in the [Communication on EU Offshore Wind Energy Ambitions](#) (2023), in which the European Commission intends to support Member States to include multi-use areas when revising MSPs, but also in the [Strategic Guidelines on EU Aquaculture](#) (2021) that underlines potential combination with the development of offshore wind power.

In the exploration of multi-use in Maritime Spatial Planning, regional authorities hold valuable knowledge to bridge the use of marine environment and the current and long-term priorities on economic activities at sea. The involvement of regional authorities in multi-use policymaking by design will thus be crucial to ensure that local perspectives and needs are effectively integrated, leading to more sustainable and context-sensitive multi-use in maritime spatial planning, and to maximise interregional cooperation on innovative practices.

Considering the EU increasing attention on multi-use and the development of several EU-funded projects<sup>3</sup> on the issue, and in order to clarify and update the objective to *promote the coexistence of relevant activities and uses* outlined in Article 5, but also the need for *consideration of relevant interactions of activities and uses* outlined in Article 8, we propose the following:

- a. Acknowledging the short [background study](#) delivered by the European Commission in 2021 as a starting basis, we call on the European Commission to deepen its reflection and define the concept of multi-use with the identification of prevailing principles for achievement (e.g. safety, competitiveness, nature protection and restoration, sectors if any, the role of Marine Protected Areas) and clarify the position of multi-use in the overall objective towards maritime spatial planning. This exercise should be performed through a cross-sectoral and multi-actors' co-reflection, which may nurture the perspective on multi-use beyond the scope of the offshore wind energy development.
- b. We highlight that the application of multi-use will increase the need for integrated governance and interactions with EU sectoral policies, which will require further collaboration and cross-sectoral exchanges at the earliest stage and by design for the future MSP plans. We stress that the participation of regional authorities should be secured and central in the development of multi-use initiatives, as they connect the interests of economic operators, provide environmental and territorial knowledge, and deliver targeted actions of support.
- c. However, while promising, we stress that multi-use may not be the ultimate one-size-fits-all solution. Several challenges such as incompatibilities with existing sea uses, varying levels of technological readiness, difficulties in integrating additional uses with established ones, insurance complexities, economic feasibility concerns, environmental and safety issues can arise. Considering these potential obstacles, it is crucial for the EU and Member States to secure compensatory measures to support activities that will suffer from economic losses in case of incompatibility.
- d. In the view of the implementation of multi-use, we call on the European Commission to deliver technical assistance and training resources to national, regional and local authorities to ensure a common understanding and the ownership of the concept, scope and objectives, and for them to have the possibility to deliver and seize opportunities via regional, national, and EU calls.

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<sup>3</sup> EU co-funded projects addressing multi-use such as [MARSPLAN-BS-II](#) (2019-2021), [MUSES](#) (2016-2018)

- e. Albeit that the development of test-sites reduces licensing and permitting requirements and funding for EU-research projects on multi-use, it is noted that there are difficulties in scaling-up multi-use projects to an economically and commercially viable phase. We encourage the European Commission to boost further innovative investments in multi-use via [the BlueInvest platform](#) which has been fostering blue economy investments on a sectoral basis. We encourage targeted activities per sea basin to further encourage cross-border cooperation, including with neighbouring countries, and public-private partnerships to supplement EU funded projects.
- f. We welcome the [EU multi-use and co-existence compendium](#) as a good start for sharing best practices, set within the EU MSP Platform, and call for a sea-basin breakdown to boost synergies and collaborations and facilitate further knowledge sharing based on shared realities.

## IV. Reinforcing comprehensive and place-based climate action

### Our key proposals at a glance

- Call on the European Commission to include the consideration of Climate Change as a minimum requirement of the MSPD.
- Call on Member States to ensure horizontal cooperation between maritime spatial plans and climate-related plans and strategies, with consideration of existing initiatives at regional level. *(point b.)*
- Ask the European Commission to include specific provisions on coastal adaptation to climate change in the future EU Climate Adaptation Plan, seeking alignment and coherence with the maritime spatial planning cycle. *(point c.)*
- Ask the European Commission to develop modelling and monitoring programmes to support knowledge gathering on socio-economic impacts of climate change for coastal areas, to be included in the EU Digital Twin of the Ocean. *(point d.)*
- Encourage the European Environment Agency to produce guidance on the inclusion of nature-based solutions for climate change into Maritime Spatial Planning. *(point e.)*

Oceans, seas, and coastal areas are both impacted by climate change and play a critical role in mitigating its effects. Coastal regional authorities and islands, which natural environment and economies are intricately connected to the sea, are already at the forefront of climate change consequences and dealing with adaptation challenges. Maritime Spatial Planning decision-making process should thus fully consider the duality of climate change on how it alters the spatial distribution of maritime activities and how these activities, in turn, may affect marine ecosystems. Acknowledging that the MSPD does include *resilience to climate change impacts* as a prerogative that Member States must contribute to as outlined in Article 5, we underline that strengthening this dimension would allow the MSP to become the robust, yet flexible instrument that supports coastal adaptation. It would also ensure that spatial measures for the oceans and seas effectively contribute to EU objectives, bridging EU Climate initiatives with regional, nature-based, place-based approaches. For the MSPD to match the magnitude of the climate-related challenges that are already faced and handled by coastal regional authorities, we propose the following:

- a. We underline the essential role of regional authorities in supporting the Climate-Smart Planning MSP process<sup>4</sup>, especially in the phase of identification of adaptation strategies and actions, which would contribute to the design of the assessment of needs and the implementation of adaptation options. As climate adaptation requires place-based expertise, we stress the importance to favour a strong bottom-up governance in Climate-Smart MSP by design, recognising the role of existing frameworks such as regional climate observatories and other regional operational structures, as well as existing regional plans and strategies.<sup>5</sup>
- b. In this perspective, we strongly recommend Member States to facilitate horizontal cooperation and alignment between the national adaptation strategies, national climate action plans, and maritime spatial plans. Proactive participation of regional authorities must be ensured to design plans that reflect the coastal challenges and realities, and to secure the integration of existing regional and local plans into MSP processes.
- c. We welcome the European Commission President Ursula Von de Leyen's proposal on a Climate Adaptation Plan<sup>6</sup> as an occasion to include specific provisions on coastal adaptation to climate change. The Plan should recognise the need for an integrated approach between coastal climate impacts management and the MSP cycle, and address means and resources to tighten the connections in practice.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO-IOC. 2021. MSPglobal Policy Brief: Climate Change and Marine Spatial Planning. Paris, UNESCO. (IOC Policy Brief no 3)

<sup>5</sup> For more details, the REGINA MSP Compendium of regional experiences provides examples in section "3.2.3 regional climate change actions and MSP".

<sup>6</sup> Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029, Ursula von der Leyen, July 2024.

- d. Underlining the need for more environmental knowledge on future impacts, we stress the need to develop further knowledge on the socio-economic impacts of climate change for maritime sectors, and on the costs of adaptation to coastal climate change. In this respect, we call the European Commission to develop a modelling and monitoring programme on these impacts, for instance that could rely on the basis work developed for the setting up of the EU Digital Twin of the Ocean.
- e. We underline that oceans and seas can provide natural solutions to address climate change. Therefore, we encourage the European Environmental Agency to deliver technical assistance and guidance in order to boost the inclusion of nature-based solutions into climate adaptation and maritime spatial planning.

## V. Positioning regional authorities as the cornerstone of land-sea interactions

### Our key proposals at a glance

- Call on Member States to secure active and direct participation of regional authorities in the design of MSP plans, leveraging and recognising the experience and expertise of regional authorities as primary implementers of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM). *(point d.)*
- Call on the European Commission to prepare an updated report on the state of implementation of the [EU Recommendation on Integrated Coastal Zone Management in Europe](#) with a focus on governance, as part of the MSPD implementation report expected in 2026. *(point b.)*
- Ask the European Commission to strengthen coordination between climate change adaptation and land-sea interaction management in MSP, considering that climate adaptation should be placed as the centrepiece for successful integrated coastal zone management policies and strategies in the future. *(point e.)*
- Encourage the Committee of the Regions to contribute to the reflection with an opinion in the Commission for Natural Resources (NAT). *(point c.)*

While Article 7 of the MSPD addresses land-sea interactions, that are also a minimum requirement of the MSP plans, it also offers flexibility to Member States on the choice of process and direct integration into the maritime spatial planning cycle. Under the impetus of the [Integrated Coastal Zone Management recommendation \(2002\)](#), (ICZM), regional authorities have become frontrunners in managing the land-



sea continuum<sup>7</sup>. Addressing land-sea interactions has been of vital importance to address natural interactions between the coast and marine waters, but also the socio-economic activities that are connected to regional values chains. We propose the following:

- a. Land-sea interactions being dynamic and influenced by changing environmental, climate and socio-economic factors, and therefore significantly affecting ecosystems that are vital for business development and growth, we draw the attention on the need of sound integration of analysis of territorial opportunities and challenges on land-sea interactions into the MSP cycle, and thus call for a strengthened reporting on this minimum requirement.
- b. We note that the last EU assessment on ICZM traces back to 2007, at a time of early implementation. Considering the new EU policy landscape, challenges, and priorities, we call the European Commission to prepare an updated report on the state of implementation of ICZM in light of MSP development, with special focus on governance practices, as a complement to the MSPD progress report expected in 2026. As an outcome, this report should produce scenarios to seek the best level of integration between the ICZM/MSPD processes for the future.
- c. We encourage the Committee of the Regions (NAT) to contribute to the reflection, for example, by preparing an opinion on the regional dimension of Integrated Coastal Zone Management and Maritime Spatial Planning, for regional authorities to express learnings and potential needs for further alignment and coherence with maritime spatial plans.
- d. In light of the above and based on the strong place-based nature of land-sea interactions, we strongly recommend Member States ensure active participation of regional authorities into the design and implementation of Maritime Spatial Plans to fulfil this minimum requirement, giving a mandate and adequate resources for regional authorities to contribute directly to the plans.
- e. Climate change adaptation must be a core pillar of the future generation of ICZM actions and strategies. This requires coordinated implementation between MSP requirements on land-sea interactions and EU Climate Adaptation initiatives both at the policy level and in designing funding and investments. The expertise of regional authorities to respond to these challenges should be placed at the core of decision-making.

## VI. Strengthening multi-level governance with the participation of regional authorities by design

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<sup>7</sup> See examples in the “REGINA MSP Compendium of regional experiences; section 3.2.1 Regional coastal zone management and Land-Sea Interactions”



### *Our key proposals at a glance*

- Call on Member States to secure active participation of regional authorities in the design of MSP plans, seeking bottom-up coordination through existing regional instances or the creation of coordination bodies. *(point a.)*
- Encourage Member States to secure alignment between the content of the plans and the innovative investments' priorities on Blue Economy stated in the Regional Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3s). *(point b.)*
- Ask the European Commission to report on and compile multi-level governance practices on the EU MSP platform. *(point c.)*
- Encourage the European Commission to develop adapted training material for regional maritime planners. *(point d.)*
- Encourage the European Commission to support the creation of a regional Community of Practice. *(point f.)*
- Suggest the EU MSP Blue Forum to launch a reflection on MSP multi-level governance *(point e.)*

From their place-based expertise to their capacity to develop targeted public policy initiatives, regional authorities are the catalyst and functional bridge between interests of economic operators, representatives of the civil society and coastal communities. Securing active participation of regional authorities by design will be a must to boost synergies and alignment between EU, national and regional development strategies and political agendas, while enhancing social acceptance. While Article 9 sets requirements to *establish means of public participation by informing and consulting at an early stage of the development of the plans*, we prescribe elevating the role of regional authorities by securing an active participation in the design, implementation, and revision of the plans, and propose the following:

- a. We strongly recommend Member States to integrate regional authorities in the elaboration of MSP plans by design, and to give a mandate to existing regional instances that already address sea-related challenges at regional level as part of a formal and structured process with the competent authority or develop regional coordination bodies.

- b. We stress the potential of Regional Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3s) as a pivotal instrument to bridge Maritime Spatial Planning to regional economic development. As many maritime regional authorities have identified blue economy and related sectors as a S3 priority through a multi-actor consulting process, synergies between S3s and the content of Maritime Spatial Plans must be systematically coordinated for plans to reflect the socio-economic ambitions and investments of maritime regional authorities.
- c. We recall that the competences of regional authorities on Maritime Spatial Planning are heterogeneous within the EU, from full competences on planning and coordination <sup>8</sup>with the national level to moderate and lesser extents. Therefore, we encourage the European Commission to report on the integration of regional and local authorities and compile multi-level governance practices on the EU MSP platform.
- d. Given this heterogeneity and regional authorities' rising interest, we alert on the need to train the marine planners in regional authorities that are gaining more competences on Maritime Spatial Planning. We thus call the European Commission to develop dedicated capacity-building and guidance towards regional and local authorities to foster the necessary territorial blue skills and further support regional development and employment, for no regional authorities to be left behind in the MSP process.
- e. We welcome the objectives of the [EU Blue Forum](#) to become a horizontal platform for proactive dialogue between sectors and stakeholders' groups. In light of its cross-sectoral and inclusive vision, we encourage the EU Blue Forum to enhance the participation of regional and local authorities, and to plan a specific reflection on means to improve multi-level and multi-actor governance in their workplan.
- f. As proposed by the [REGINA-MSP project](#), the emergence of a community of practice <sup>9</sup>(CoP) involving regional authorities would be of paramount relevance to encourage new knowledge and solutions to be disseminated among marine users, decision-makers and other stakeholders, to achieve integrated and climate-smart maritime spatial planning and sustainable management of the marine environment and its uses. In addition, Communities of Practice in Maritime Spatial Planning can be a powerful tool for bringing together experts and professionals who are familiar with the transboundary nature of the sea and the complexities of marine governance and could share their knowledge and experience on maritime affairs. To ensure complementarity between a

<sup>8</sup> See as an example, the "REGINA MSP Compendium of regional experiences; section 3.1.1 Regional Councils for regional non-binding MSP in Finland: the marine regions of Archipelago Sea and Southern Bothnian sea and the Gulf of Finland - Baltic Sea basin".

<sup>9</sup> See "REGINA MSP Communication brief - Boosting the role of Regions in Maritime Spatial Planning - A roadmap for the emergence of a cross-regional Community of Practice".

cross-sea-basin CoP of regional authorities and the existing CoPs in place, we strongly recommend coordination between these initiatives. We suggest the EU Blue Forum considers the proposal of the creation of a CoP of regional authorities as part of future activities on multi-level governance.

## VII. A sea-basin approach for the most integrated and coordinated future of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive?

### Our key proposals at a glance

- Call on the European Commission to launch a reflection on the regionalisation (sea-basin dimension) of Maritime Spatial Planning per sea-basin, with full involvement of regional authorities in the process as to lever their existing experience on a cross-border and interregional level.
- Ask the European Commission to explore the potential of sea-basin and macro-regional strategies to operationalise the transboundary reflection on MSP, providing these strategies adequate support and resources to integrate a horizontal MSP dimension to the implementation of their respective priorities. *(point c., e.)*
- Suggest Interreg Programmes with a maritime dimension to integrate a horizontal policy objective on MSP, for EU projects' results to be capitalised on a political level per sea-basin. *(point d.)*
- Recommend the European Commission to seize the EU Digital Twin of the Ocean as a core tool to boost the interoperability of MSP data and thus transboundary cooperation. *(point f.)*
- Call on the European Parliament to propose a pilot project on the transboundary third-country cooperation on the design of MSP plans to feed the reflection on potential new EU actions on the regionalisation of maritime spatial planning in the future. *(point g.)*

Considering the transboundary nature of marine ecosystems, the mobility of several maritime activities such as shipping, fisheries, and the growing interrelation of other uses of the sea such as offshore wind farms interconnectors and networks, Member States must deal increasingly with shared challenges that require a larger-scale approach. With ambitions to boost the future of EU Blue Economy and a cohesive ecosystem-based management, enhancing sea-basin level action will

be essential to tap into the full potential of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive. In order to encourage optimal implementation of Article 11 on Cooperation among Member States and 12 on Cooperation with third countries, we call the European Commission to launch a reflection on the regionalisation of maritime spatial planning by sea-basin, capitalising on existing EU frameworks and instruments of transboundary cooperation. We propose the following:

- a. We welcome the objective outlined in the [EU Communication on EU Offshore Renewable Energy Ambitions](#) (2023) to explore with *Member States and regional organisations ways to move from purely national MSPs with cross-border consultations to regional MSP planning with the respective sea-basins*. We call the European Commission to promote this vision holistically and not only from an energy sector point of view and integrate regional authorities in this paradigm shift.
- b. With the example of the Greater North Sea Basin Initiative (GNSBI), we underline that EU Member States and third countries have already started a cooperation on inter-ministerial level and with a sectoral motive. We stress that while expanding maritime spatial planning to a sea-basin level, it is crucial that regional authorities play an even greater role in the delivery through their long-lasting experience of cross-border cooperation, sharing of best practice, and deep territorial knowledge. We thus call the European Commission to pay the utmost importance in safeguarding multi-level governance and public participation in MSP initiatives, even as the issues are addressed on a larger scale.
- c. Given the point above, we underline the potential of macro-regional and sea-basins strategies to be the existing, multi-level, political framework to operationalise this shift towards a regionalisation (sea-basin dimension) of Maritime Spatial Planning. In this respect, we call the European Commission to support and provide favourable conditions to these strategies to enhance their action on MSP, such as with the creation of a horizontal advisory board on Maritime Spatial Planning within their respective structures.
- d. We advise Interreg Programmes (cross-border and transnational cooperation strands) with a maritime geographical scope to include an MSP horizontal priority so that cross-border projects could contribute to the sea-basin and macro-regional strategies agenda and their results be capitalised at a political level. We underline the potential of EU projects as bottom-up levers for practical cross-border cooperation and to nurture political reflections based on on-field knowledge.
- e. We alert on the need to reinforce and frame third-countries participation in the design and implementation of EU Maritime Spatial Planning. In this respect, we point out the capacity of sea-basin strategies and macro-regional strategies to be the basis of a framework of discussion and knowledge sharing based on pre-existing experience.

- f. In order to ensure effective cooperation based on best available scientific knowledge, we underline the need to improve the interoperability of Maritime Spatial Planning data and knowledge<sup>10</sup>, and thus ultimately support the implementation of Article 10 of the MSPD. In collaboration with EMODnet, we call the European Commission to seize the future Ocean Digital Twin of the Ocean as a genuine opportunity to develop accessible, usable data and knowledge that could boost cooperation across the EU for MSP planners.
- g. In order to explore and reinforce the capacity of regionalization (sea-basin dimension) of Maritime Spatial Planning, we recommend the European Parliament to submit a proposal for a pilot project to reflect on in stakeholders from and testing new governance mechanisms related to the design of transnational maritime spatial plans and the coordinated dialogue among key stakeholders from the same sea basin and/or sub-area.

## VIII. Our call: we need a political debate on the relevance and future of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive

### Our call at a glance:

- Ask the future European Commissioner for Oceans & Fisheries to integrate the ambition to strengthen the EU approach to maritime spatial planning as a priority of the new European Oceans Pact. *(point a.)*
- Call on the European Commission to launch a public debate on the role and relevance of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive, securing inclusive, representative, and multi-level public participation in this reflecting process. *(point b., f.)*
- Recommend the European Parliament to contribute to the reflection through an own-initiative report on the future of Maritime Spatial Planning and the report on the review of the Maritime Strategy Framework Directive. *(point d.)*

<sup>10</sup> See the REGINA MSP Inventory of existing geoportal: <https://www.regina-msp.eu/inventory-regional-european-geoportals> and REGINA MSP Data report - Analysis on regional data and geoportal of interest for national MSP (<https://www.regina-msp.eu/deliverables>).

- Encourage the European Parliament to re-establish the Seas, Rivers, Islands & Coastal Areas Intergroup (SEArICA) to support cross-sectoral and transversal exchanges at EU level. (*point e.*)

Given the growing importance of the oceans and seas to contribute to EU objectives, the use of marine waters should not be determined by fragmented series of sectoral policies. More than ever, we need to ensure a cohesive and integrated approach, based on regional expertise, challenges, and potential, to discuss and decide on future EU objectives at sea for long-term effectiveness.

We believe in the potential of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive to become the conductor policy, where sectoral policies would be discussed and designed ensuring functional synergies and capitalising on the decision-making process and outcomes of the implementation of the MSPD. Maritime Spatial Planning should go beyond technical considerations and mapping exercises, and it should be deeply anchored in political dynamics: therefore, for the MSPD to become the political arbitration tool of the future of the Integrated Maritime Policy, we share one call to the EU Institutions, and recommend the following actions:

- a. To achieve the goals outlined in [the Mission Letter](#) to Costas Kadis, Commissioner-designate for Fisheries and Oceans, we call for stronger integration between the creation of a European Oceans Pact<sup>11</sup> and the ambition to strengthen the EU approach to maritime spatial planning. While ensuring coherence across all policy areas linked to the oceans is outlined to explain the creation of the Pact, we recall that Maritime Spatial Planning is the existing tool to respond to such challenge: therefore, these two actions should not be treated in siloes. Instead, we call for the reflection towards the future of Maritime Spatial Planning to be a core priority of the actions foreseen as part of the delivery of the European Oceans Pact.
- b. In this respect, the European Commission should prepare an assessment of the directive, starting with a call for evidence, to discuss whether the MSPD is still fit for purpose and where adjustments may be needed to tap into its full potential to become the bedrock instrument to achieve an EU Integrated Maritime Policy.
- c. While regretting the lack of mention of EU maritime policies and of the high growth potential of Blue Economy sectors, we point out the lack of coordination of EU policies outlined in [the report](#) on the future of European competitiveness and thus call, in this revamped reflection on Maritime Spatial Planning, to seize the coordinating potential of the MSPD which could be

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<sup>11</sup> Also outlined in President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines of July 2024.

reflected in integrated, ambitious flagship EU funding for the future of Maritime Spatial Planning.

- d. We call the European Parliament to deliver an own-initiative report on the future of Maritime Spatial Planning Directive, and strongly encourage the future rapporteurs on the Review of the marine strategy framework directive to integrate the MSPD/MSFD interconnectedness at the heart of their proposals.
  - e. We underline the role of the Seas, Rivers, Islands & Coastal Areas ([SEArica](#)) Intergroup as a key multi-level, cross-sectoral, and cross-committees political forum to accompany the political reflection on the future of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive and the EU Pact for Oceans, and therefore call for its renewal for 2024-2029.
  - f. We remind EU Member States and the European Commission of the objective of the European Green Deal to *leave no one behind*, and thus underline the vital necessity for regional authorities to be an active part of the reflection to shape a more integrated, cross-border, multi-actors and multi-level future of the Maritime Spatial Planning Directive.
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