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WHERE DIGITAL & BUSINESS BECOME HUMAN

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ON COMPUTER SCIENCES & MANAGEMENT TOUCHPOINTS,
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11

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND DIGITAL CAPACITY BUILDING IN EUSAIR

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of youth engagement and digital capacity building within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR). As macro-regional strategies aim to foster territorial cohesion and cross-border cooperation, the paper focuses on how EUSAIR is shaping opportunities for youth empowerment in the digital era, particularly in Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans. While EUSAIR's core thematic pillars: Blue Growth, Environmental Quality, Sustainable Tourism, and Connecting the Region, do not explicitly prioritise youth, recent developments signal a growing commitment to integrating youth perspectives through different initiatives. These platforms have demonstrated the value of youth voices in policy design, mobility programs, digital upskilling, and regional innovation. The article highlights critical challenges facing young people in the Adriatic-Ionian macroregion, including brain drain, skill mismatches, and unequal access to digital tools and infrastructure. Drawing on institutional frameworks such as the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 and the European Education Area, the paper assesses how multilevel governance and stakeholder engagement can translate youth participation into structural impact. This study identifies key leverage points for increasing youth inclusion in the implementation of macro-regional strategies. It also emphasises the importance of integrating digital citizenship, ICT literacy, and civic participation into capacity-building programs for long-term sustainability.

The paper concludes by recommending a stronger cross-sectoral approach to youth empowerment, greater alignment between thematic priorities and youth needs, and institutional mechanisms to measure the long-term impact of youth engagement on regional development. As the Adriatic-

Ionian region embraces digital transformation, equipping youth to co-lead that transition is not only a policy imperative but also a strategic investment in the region's future.¹

Keywords: Macro Region Strategies, EUSAIR, Youth Capacity Building, Digital Transformation, Adriatic-Ionian region.

I. INTRODUCTION

Regional development is an important policy for fostering economic and social growth, and the European Union implements the cohesion policy to support the development of its member states' regions. This article explores the significance of macroregional strategies, particularly emphasising the role of youth engagement within the EUSAIR macro-regional strategy. The central theme guiding the exploration is: How are youth engaged in the EUSAIR macro-regional strategy? The journey takes us to the intersection of youth empowerment and digital technology. This highlights the significance of continuous youth engagement initiatives in shaping a more sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive future for the younger generations in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-region.

I narrow my focus to one of the macroregional strategies, namely the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), which covers the Adriatic-Ionian Macro Region. Within EUSAIR, there are 10 participating countries: 4 EU Member States (Greece, Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia), 5 EU candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia), and a third country, San Marino.

European Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS) serve as a comprehensive policy framework that facilitates collaborative efforts between regions and countries in a specified geographical area (European Commission, 2020). Together, these actors address shared challenges and opportunities by establishing a set of common, long-term objectives tailored to the macro-region's needs. This collective approach enhances cooperation, making policies more effective and efficient than addressing challenges in isolation.

Within the framework of EUSAIR (EUSAIR, n.d.), there is a commitment to actively engage youth, recognising them as a cornerstone in shaping inclusive policies that cater to the unique needs and aspirations of the younger generation (European Commission, 2014). In line with the objectives outlined in the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (European Commission, 2018), EUSAIR's focus turns around fostering cooperation and establishing robust youth policies. The objective is to attentively

¹ This work was supported by UniAdrion program name "AI-NURECC PLUS Transnational Mobility Experience", and the University of Primorska, Faculty of Management, September – November 2023.

listen to the voices of young individuals across the EUSAIR to inform policymaking and bring greater legitimacy to the actions taken. Youth ideas, insights, and creativity play a crucial role in addressing the challenges, ensuring that policies not only remain relevant but also exercise a substantial impact. For instance, the youth mobility initiative of the AI-NURECC PLUS mobility program (UniAdriion, 2023) within the EUSAIR framework showcases the strategy's commitment to empowering the youth in the region. This mobility program, as an implementing activity under the strategy, demonstrates the strategy's proactive approach to empowering youth. This initiative responds to the need to prepare youth for an era defined by digital transformations, recognising that fostering data flows across public, private, and civil society channels impacts development.

This paper explores macro-regional strategies and examines the intersection of youth engagement and digital technology to empower youth capacities. This paper consists of this introduction and four sections. In section two, we dive into understanding the 'Macroregional strategy' as an integrated framework within the European Union. In section three, the article provides insights into youth in the region, their challenges, and perspectives. In section four, we discuss youth engagement and digital opportunities in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro Region, exploring solutions and best practices that leverage digital for youth capacity building. As our journey concludes, we leave you with section five, conclusions and recommendations, in which empowered youth become architects of regional progress, and we chart the road ahead with a vision for the digital era.

II. UNDERSTANDING MACRO REGION STRATEGIES

II.1 Historical Context

Macroregional strategies were first introduced in 2009 with the Baltic Sea Macroregional Strategy, marking the beginning of an era in EU transnational cooperation in the macroregions. Since then, the EU has adopted three additional macroregional strategies, including the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR), introduced in December 2012 and approved by the European Council in September 2014 (European Commission, 2014). These strategies serve as collaborative frameworks, uniting regions and countries to address shared challenges more effectively than individual efforts within the EU.

II.2 The EUSAIR Strategy

Since its 2014 adoption, EUSAIR has been supporting social, economic, and territorial cohesion across ten EU and non-EU countries. One specific aspect of the EUSAIR is its aim to play a crucial role in facilitating the integration of potential and current candidates into the EU. The Adriatic-Ionian Macro Region brings together a diverse group of countries, EU and non-EU member states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, San Marino, Serbia, Croatia, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia. EUSAIR sets forth two predominant objectives (EUSAIR, n.d.):

- Promoting Sustainable Economic and Social Prosperity: This involves fostering growth and job creation, enhancing attractiveness, competitiveness, and connectivity, all while preserving the environment and ensuring a healthy marine and coastal ecosystem.
- Contributing to EU Integration: EUSAIR strives to facilitate the integration of Western Balkan candidate and potential candidate countries into the EU by leveraging shared history and geography.

To achieve these objectives, EUSAIR has outlined priorities in four thematic areas (EUSAIR, n.d.).

- Blue Growth: Aiming to foster innovative marine and maritime growth, promoting jobs and business opportunities in the blue economy.
- Connecting the Region: Focused on improving transport and energy connectivity within the region.
- Environmental Quality: Concentrated on preserving coastal and marine biodiversity, addressing pollution, and enhancing terrestrial habitats and biodiversity.
- Sustainable Tourism: Geared toward unlocking the full potential of the region in terms of innovative quality tourism while boosting businesses and creating stable jobs.

Notably, youth empowerment is not explicitly addressed within these thematic areas, but, in line with the objectives outlined in the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 (European Commission, 2018), EUSAIR has given attention to fostering cooperation and establishing healthy youth policies.

The macro-region narrative begins with the establishment of the Baltic Sea Macroregional Strategy, which has since been echoed in similar initiatives across the Danube, Alpine, and Mediterranean regions. These designations are not mere geographical divisions; they form the background for a compelling story involving challenges such as pollution, security, climate change, unemployment, and connectivity issues that transcend traditional borders.

Macro-regions function as interconnected territorial spaces that share common patterns, needs and challenges, aligning with descriptions of macro-regional governance found in the literature (Gänzle & Mirtl, 2019). Its mission is to coordinate joint policies and actions to dismantle both tangible and intangible barriers. In essence, MRS shapes these macro regions into healthier, more resilient, and enchanting places to live. Unlike traditional projects with fixed deadlines, these strategies establish collaborative frameworks that build transnational, cross-sectoral networks of expertise, akin to assembling a team of experts for long-term prosperity. Their cross-sectoral and multilevel governance approach is the key to their success. Unlike traditional projects, these strategies, akin to experienced agents, address issues requiring cooperation across multiple countries (Committee of the Regions, 2009). Beyond administrative functions, they strengthen regional identity, engaging citizens in participation and responsibility. Their strength lies in their flexibility, which allows innovative solutions beyond bureaucratic constraints. Consider the

following success stories: the Baltic Sea being upgraded, the Danube becoming more accessible, hydrogen being used as a green fuel in the Alps, and the Adriatic-Ionian region becoming a tourist attraction. These strategies align with key European political initiatives and will help accelerate green, digital, and social transitions.

"Given that a Europe of macro-regions is slowly emerging, the attraction of the bulk of international mobile investment to the technologically advanced western European countries can only be balanced by the Balkan region based on intensive relations, emerging markets opportunities and a strategic development plan that will reveal the new role of the region in connecting Europe with the Mediterranean basin and the Black Sea countries.", stated by Dubois, Hedin, Schmitt, & Sterling (2009).

III. YOUTH IN THE REGION, CHALLENGES, AND PERSPECTIVES

III.1 Demographics and Aspirations

The young individuals in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro Region come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, reflecting the region's rich tapestry. To gain a comprehensive understanding of youth in the region, I present key aspects, including demographic characteristics, regional variations, and perspectives, as reflected in public polls, particularly regarding EU membership. How do these aspects vary across different corners of the macro-region? What are the specific challenges faced by the youth, and how do their perspectives shape the broader narrative, especially concerning EU membership? These are the questions we explore in this section.

Seeking empirical insights, recent polls and data sources offer insightful data that sheds light on youth opinions and perspectives in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro Region. According to a poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in the region (International Republican Institute, 2023), the opinions and outlook of the youth play an essential role in shaping the narrative. Additionally, the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) provides a valuable repository of datasets (ICPSR, n.d.), shedding light on critical aspects of youth composition and perspectives.

III.2 Barriers and Opportunities

Young people across the Adriatic-Ionian region experience diverse contexts, yet surveys indicate shared aspirations regarding employment, education, and mobility (Chisholm & Kovacheva, 2002). They want to get great employment opportunities, get an adequate education, and make a difference in the community they live in. These dreams go beyond borders and backgrounds, merging a common line through their diverse lives. However, the path to these dreams is not always easy. Some face limited educational opportunities, while others struggle to find jobs in a rapidly

changing digital world (YouthPolicy.org, 2022). For some, technology is natural, but for others, it is a new frontier. In a world where borders seem less important, many of these young people seek opportunities abroad (OECD, 2019) due to the lack of jobs and opportunities at home. They are at the intersections of tradition and a rapidly evolving global world, shaping their identities in a fast-evolving era. This is not just about statistics; it is about the lives, dreams, and hopes of a generation set to shape the future. They are the links that connect communities and nations, eager to leave their marks both locally and globally.

EU integration represents a viable option for development, since the EU enlargement process has put candidate countries on a reform path aimed at improving domestic institutions, adhering to the rule of law, and enhancing the functioning of domestic markets (DG NEAR). Within this framework, critical youth empowerment emerges as the heart of regional growth. It goes beyond individual aspirations, integrating opportunities that lead to positive change at both the individual and community levels. The essence lies in programs that empower youth, providing avenues for personal development and engagement with diverse sectors, starting with the local community and extending to regional and international communities.

The impact of youth empowerment extends beyond the individual, creating a more diverse representation of citizens engaged in building civil society (OECD, 2023). Integrated community-level outcomes include effective organisational coalitions, pluralistic leadership, and increased participatory skills among community members. Youth engagement in community organisations produces "movement effects" throughout the community, setting new standards and fostering social bonding (Heaney & Rojas, 2014). The critical social empowerment, as an essential aspect, involves both individual and group-level change. It recognises the capacity of young people to contribute to the well-being of their communities, emphasising the importance of developing awareness of social practices, structures, and norms (Jennings et al., 2006). For true empowerment, youth need not only to address community problems but also to critically examine the sociopolitical forces sustaining these issues (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009). A complete framework of youth development envisions the capacity for change at organisational, institutional, and social levels, transforming not just policies and structures but also social values and norms (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001, 2004).

In essence, the journey of youth empowerment entails equipping the younger generation with the skills and knowledge to address issues beyond immediate concerns. It involves empowering them to be catalysts for substantial social transformation by challenging and reshaping the systems that give rise to challenges in the first place.

IV. YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT IN THE ADRIATIC-IONIAN REGION

IV.1 European Youth Policy Evolution

While the EU has a history of engaging in youth mobility programs, dating back to the late 1980s with initiatives like Erasmus (European Commission, 1987) and Youth for Europe (European Commission, 1988), formal coordination of youth policy between the European Commission and its member states took shape in 2002 (European Commission, 2001), the incentive for this coordination occurred from the 2001 European Commission White Paper on Youth (European Commission, 2001) which focused on themes such as participation, information, voluntary activities, and a deeper understanding of youth. As a result of the 2001 European Commission White Paper on Youth, the Commission and the member states agreed upon a framework of cooperation, through what is known as the 'open method of coordination'. Subsequent milestones in this trajectory include the European Youth Pact of 2005 (Council of the European Union, 2005) with the main aim to improve the education, training, mobility, vocational integration and social inclusion of young Europeans and the 2009 Council Resolution on a renewed framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field (Council of the European Union, 2009), serving as a renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities.

The evolution of youth policy across sectors has prompted the European Union to implement comprehensive mechanisms for a multilevel, cross-sectoral, and interconnected youth policy. This ambitious initiative seeks to improve the situation of young people in the EU, in response to challenges identified by Eurostat (2023). The European Commission's White Paper underscores the importance of engaging young people in the policymaking process. Recognising that policies directly impact the lives of youth, the EU emphasises the importance of incorporating their perspectives into policy design and formulation. This acknowledgement reflects a commitment to a more inclusive, youth-centric approach to shaping the future of the European Union.

IV.2 Youth Engagement in EUSAIR

The VII Adriatic and Ionian Council / EUSAIR Ministerial Meeting in Tirana on May 16, 2022 (EUSAIR, n.d.), marked the most significant expansion of the Macro-Regional Youth Empowerment effort. The Tirana Declaration reaffirmed the significant recognition of 2022 as the European Year of Youth, and Tirana was awarded the title of 2022 European Youth Capital (YouthPolicy.org, 2022). Recognised as a significant force behind peacebuilding, reunification, and regional cooperation, youth empowerment took centre stage. The Adriatic-Ionian region's stakeholders, including the business community, media, and social and non-governmental actors, were invited to participate in the Declaration, which placed a strong emphasis on inclusivity. It emphasised the importance of supporting young people's voices and fostering partnerships for EU integration and European values. In the Declaration, it was promised to increase youth exchanges between the EU and Western Balkan AII/EUSAIR participating countries. The Declaration proposed establishing an EUSAIR youth council to increase youth input into the EUSAIR MRS. As a result, the Adriatic-Ionian

Macro region's youth narrative emerged as an integrated network with challenges, transformative strategies, and a collective commitment to empower the voices of the future.

When reviewing EUSAIR's thematic priorities, it is evident that youth engagement is not explicitly identified as a priority area. Nevertheless, macroregional strategies, including EUSAIR, are committed to involving a broad spectrum of stakeholders in their implementation. To this end, considerable efforts have been made to engage the region's youth through various activities meaningfully. These initiatives encompass consultations facilitated through dedicated youth entry points, top-down approaches that seamlessly integrate young people into decision-making bodies, coordination facilitated by youth networks, and collaborative efforts between regions. Currently, an ongoing consultation is led by the EUSAIR Youth Council (EUSAIR, n.d.), a recent mechanism established to ensure the active involvement of young voices in shaping the macro-regional strategy. This ongoing initiative reflects a concerted effort to actively involve and consider youth perspectives in EUSAIR's decision-making processes.

In addition to these general efforts, several targeted initiatives have significantly contributed to engaging youth in the EUSAIR region. Notable examples include:

- EUSAIR4YOUTH: A project focused on reinforcing the sense of Adriatic-Ionian community by empowering cities, youth, universities, and organisations in EUSAIR countries. This initiative aims to gather young people, encourage their active participation in policymaking, and strengthen cooperation.
- THE ADRIATIC-IONIAN REGION IS YOU(TH)! A conference held in November 2023 in Split, organised by the Albanian EUSAIR presidency. The conference aimed to connect young people and youth organisations, addressing topics such as brain drain and digitalisation.
- POPRI EUSAIR YOUTH: An annual competition that promotes entrepreneurship among young people in the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. The competition, organised by Primorska Technology Park, encourages innovative business ideas and involves a prestigious international entrepreneurship jury.
- AI NURECC in Tirana: The Adriatic-Ionian Youth Organisations Forum focused on youth engagement in EUSAIR and addressed key youth-related issues in the region, including brain drain. It showcased projects such as Interreg volunteering opportunities (IVY), AI-NURECC PLUS opportunities for EUSAIR youth, and the Adriatic Ionian Youth Network adhesion campaign (AIYN).
- Info Day: 'Adriatic Ionian Youth own their future': Organised by the Adriatic-Ionian Euroregion, this event aimed to encourage youth to take ownership of the EUSAIR. It facilitated an open dialogue between EUSAIR's institutional structures and the Adriatic-Ionian Youth.

These initiatives collectively underscore a commitment to youth involvement, recognising their role as active contributors to the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region's development. Within the broader framework of the EUSAIR strategy, youth initiative programs play a crucial role in translating the recognised potential into tangible outcomes. As outlined in the EUSAIR Youth Consultation, ongoing initiatives like EUSAIR4YOUTH, 'The Adriatic-Ionian Region is You(th)!', POPRI EUSAIR YOUTH, and activities such as the AI NURECC in Tirana and 'Adriatic Ionian Youth own their future' Info Day underscore the commitment to engage and empower young voices actively. These programs aim to bridge the gap between the strategy's transformative recommendations and on-the-ground impact by fostering youth participation, encouraging innovative ideas, and promoting collaboration among young people across the Adriatic-Ionian region. In line with the European Parliament's call for greater youth involvement, these initiatives exemplify a concerted effort to shape the EUSAIR strategy through the active contributions of the region's youth and to strengthen its ties with other macro-regional initiatives.

Notwithstanding, in September 2023, the youth unemployment rate in the EU rose slightly to 14.2%, up from 14.1% in August 2023. The data, sourced from Eurostat (Eurostat, 2023), indicates a rise of 38,000 in youth unemployment in the EU during this period. This statistic serves as a crucial indicator of alignment between young individuals' skills and the employment opportunities offered by regional economies.

The persistent shortage of skills and experience impedes young people's access to career opportunities, especially in lower-income economies where educational systems often fall short of providing relevant programs. Bridging qualification gaps and aligning training with market demands are crucial to addressing youth unemployment.

The growing importance of ICT literacy, digital skills, and digital citizenship emerges as a key solution to empower youth in the digital age. Recognising the skills required for active participation in the digital environment, formal and informal learning programs have been established. Digital citizenship, encompassing safety, well-being, civic engagement, and identity exploration, plays a pivotal role in shaping responsible digital behaviour. The integration of technology, particularly in remote areas with limited teaching staff, proves instrumental in overcoming barriers to education. Internet access provides access to high-quality learning materials and enables interactive teacher-student engagement through cloud-based technologies.

The emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has further democratised education, offering flexible, customisable learning paths. Leveraging technologies such as computers, mobile phones, projectors, and cloud-based tools enhances digital competencies and creates interactive learning experiences. While technology-mediated learning offers flexibility in location, timing, and target audiences, challenges persist due to limited access to ICT and limited digital literacy. Despite these challenges, the integrated approach of innovative policies, stakeholder collaboration, and

technology adoption underscores the commitment to addressing the multifaceted issues confronting young people in the ever-evolving digital landscape of the Adriatic-Ionian Region.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper explores the dynamics of macro-regional strategies, with a particular focus on the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR), in order to better understand youth engagement and digital empowerment in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro Region. The EUSAIR framework demonstrates a strong commitment to youth involvement. Proactive initiatives such as the AI-NURECC PLUS mobility program demonstrate the strategy's commitment to preparing youth for the digital era (UniAdriion, 2023).

The paper has uncovered the diverse challenges faced by the youth in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro Region, ranging from limited educational opportunities to the impact of rapid technological changes. Youth empowerment emerges as a central force for regional growth, reaching beyond individual aspirations to integrate opportunities that drive positive change at both the individual and community levels. Empowering youth catalyses substantial social transformation, challenging and reshaping systems to address issues at their roots.

As we navigated the evolving landscape of youth engagement, this paper underscored the importance of ongoing initiatives and targeted programs. The EUSAIR Youth Consultation and initiatives like EUSAIR4YOUTH, 'The Adriatic-Ionian Region is You(th)!', POPRI EUSAIR YOUTH, AI NURECC in Tirana, and 'Adriatic Ionian Youth own their future' Info Day demonstrated a collective commitment to actively engage and empower young voices (EUSAIR, n.d.).

Here are some recommendations coming from this paper exploration:

1. Enhanced integration of youth into thematic priorities: while EUSAIR's priorities focus on areas such as Blue Growth, Connecting the Region, Environmental Quality, and Sustainable Tourism, there is room to address youth empowerment within these priorities explicitly. Integrating youth-centric considerations across all thematic areas can further enhance the effectiveness of the macro-regional strategy.
2. Expanded youth consultation mechanisms: the ongoing EUSAIR Youth Consultation is a valuable way to engage young voices. Expanding and diversifying such consultation platforms will ensure a broader representation of youth perspectives. Inclusivity should be a guiding principle, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the region's youth.
3. Digital skills development initiatives: Given the growing importance of digital skills, initiatives focused on digital literacy, ICT access, and online education should be prioritised.

Collaborations with educational institutions, the private sector, and non-governmental organisations can amplify the impact of these initiatives.

4. Cross-sectoral collaboration for holistic youth development: strengthening ties among governments, businesses, academia, and civil society is essential. This collaborative approach can ensure that youth empowerment initiatives address a spectrum of challenges and provide well-rounded support.
5. Monitoring and evaluation framework: Establishing a robust framework for youth empowerment initiatives will enable continuous improvement. Regular assessments of the impact, effectiveness, and inclusivity of programs will guide future strategies and ensure they remain responsive to the evolving needs of the youth.

In conclusion, this paper highlights the essential role of actively involving and empowering the region's youth in shaping the future of the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-region for a sustainable, prosperous, and inclusive digital era. The commitment to youth-centric policies and initiatives is not just an investment in the present; it is an investment in the resilience and dynamism of the entire macro-region in the years to come.

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