

EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Implementation Report 2019



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With special thanks to EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and their teams and to EUSDR National Coordinators active in the period of 2019-2020.

Imprint:

This implementation report aims at illustrating EUSDR developments and achievements 2019 by focusing on activities on general EUSDR level and especially by taking into account activities on Priority Area level.

The main sources of this report are EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators' and National Coordinators' reports to the Danube Transnational Programme and the European Commission, respectively, submitted for the period of 2019. Furthermore, Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators provided feedback and additional information on the draft report in November/December 2020.

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Table of Abbreviations

AP.....	Action Plan	EUSDR.....	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy	HLG.....	High Level Group
DSP.....	Danube Strategy Point	MRS.....	macro-regional strategy
DTP.....	Danube Transnational Programme	NC.....	National Coordinator
EU.....	European Union	PAC.....	Priority Area Coordinator
EUSBSR ...	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region	SG.....	Steering Group

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1. Introduction

This implementation report illustrates developments and achievements of the EU Strategy of the Danube Region (EUSDR) made in 2019 with a special focus on the activities of EUSDR National Coordinators (NCs) and Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) along with their Steering Groups (SGs), see Figure 1¹. In doing so, it takes up on the EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018².

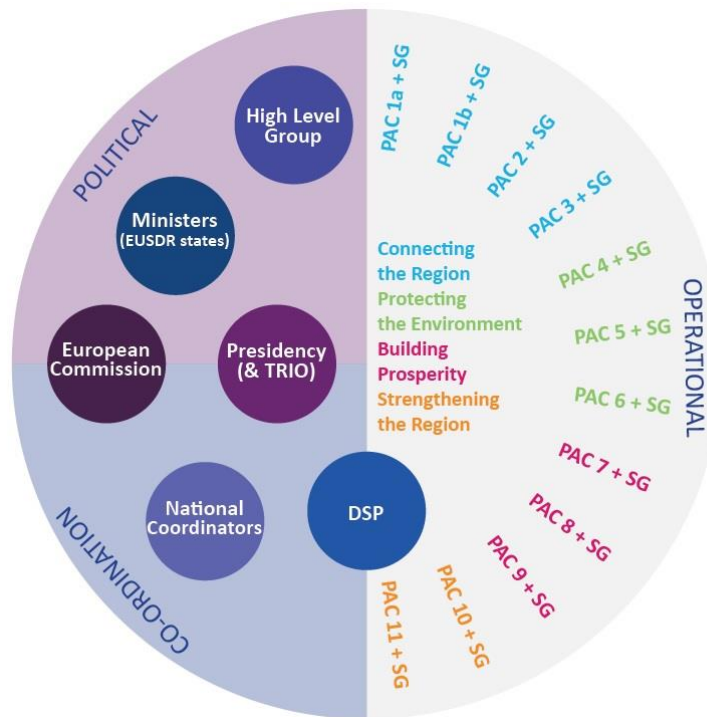


Figure 1: EUSDR Core Governance
(Source: illustration by the Danube Strategy Point)

The main sources for this report are EUSDR meeting documents and minutes from PAC-, NC- and NC-PAC meetings, the National Coordinators' and the Priority Area Coordinators' reports to the European Commission for the 3rd report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies as well as the Priority Area Coordinators' project reports to the Danube Transnational Programme (DTP). Online research on the Priority Areas' websites was done to complement these sources.

The EUSDR Implementation Reports constitute an integral part of the new EUSDR monitoring system, which is currently elaborated by the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) in cooperation with NCs and PACs. Future EUSDR Implementation Reports are planned to be issued biennially – based upon the new monitoring system.³

¹ Further information on the core stakeholders of the Strategy: <https://danube-region.eu/about/governance/>.

² For basic information on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and its Priority Areas please see Implementation Report 2016-2018, p.1.

³ As presented by DSP to PACs on 22nd January 2019 in Bucharest and to NCs on 14th-15th February 2019 in Bucharest as well as in the course of Steering Group meetings.

2. EUSDR Activities and Key Priorities in 2019

In recent years National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators along with their Steering Groups have brought forward the Strategy in seven major fields, as the EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 (pp. 41-48) illustrates: capacity building, untapping funding sources, involving further stakeholders, alignment of the Strategy with national and EU documents, identifying routes towards more policy impact, elaborating ideas for an EUSDR monitoring and evaluation system and forging close ties within the Danube Region on all levels. Out of these seven fields, in 2019 National Coordinators together with Priority Coordinators and the Danube Strategy Point focused on the **alignment of EUSDR activities with funding sources (EUSDR Embedding)**, building up an adequate **monitoring and evaluation system**, **strengthening communication** and **building EUSDR internal and cross-MRS capacity**. These topics were particularly discussed at meetings at EUSDR core governance level (see Table 1). Another crucial task of 2019 for EUSDR core stakeholders was the **revision of the EUSDR Action Plan (AP)**. The following paragraphs give a brief insight into each of these tasks.

Table 1: Meetings at EUSDR core governance level in 2019

Type	Date & Place	Focus
PAC Meeting	22-23/01/2019 Bucharest, RO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rules of Procedure for Priority Area Coordinators DTP calls (3rd DTP Call for project proposals & 2nd PAC Call) EUSDR AP revision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presentation of the report on the results of the consultation process Revision process of the Action Plan within the EUSBSR Interact: potential horizontal coordination across MRS EUSDR monitoring & reporting
NC Meeting	14-15/02/2019 Bucharest, RO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EUSDR stakeholder involvement (communication workshop) Future horizontal coordination across MRS Second EC Report on the implementation of EU MRS – state of play AP revision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> State of play at PAC level Connecting PACs & NCs ESPON - European and Macro-regional Territorial Monitoring Tool EUSDR Communication Plan & outlook on new EUSDR website
HLG Meeting	22/02/2019 Brussels, BE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High Level Group (HLG) Meeting on Macro Regional Strategies
NC-PAC Meeting	23-24/05/2019 Bucharest, RO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Second EC Report on the implementation of EU MRS – state of play AP revision: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positions on Draft Consolidated Input Outcome of online public consultations AP alignment with strategic documents relevant for programming Danube Region analysis, monitoring & evaluation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> DTP Territorial Analysis ESPON – European and Macro-regional Territorial Monitoring Tool Preliminary results EUSDR Operational Evaluation Discussion on the 2021 Presidency of the EUSDR
8th EUSDR Annual Forum	27-28/06/2019 Bucharest, RO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implemented under the Romanian EUSDR Presidency Dedicated to connectivity and regional mobility, fostering cluster development, research and innovation, digitalisation, people to people contacts and tourism Informal EUSDR Ministerial Meeting on “The role of SMEs and business support structures as instruments for regional development in the framework of the post 2020 Cohesion Policy” Public Hearing on the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan
NC-PAC Workshop	24/09/2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EUSDR Action Plan

	Vienna, AT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Presentation of first draft of the revised EUSDR Action Plan by DG REGIO ○ Feedback by NCs and PACs ○ Exchange on the formulation of the actions and targets
TRIO Meeting	30/09/2019 Chişinău, MD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Informal EUSDR TRIO Presidency Meeting on Priorities, initiatives and plans of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency
NC Meeting	21-22/11/2019 Zagreb, HR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● HR EUSDR Presidency: Introduction of priorities, tasks and goals ● Future EUSDR Presidency 2021 following Croatia ● EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper and NC Rules of Procedure ● Embedding of EUSDR into mainstream programmes ● AP revision: state of play ● DTP state of play ● EUSDR monitoring & reporting: update & future steps ● EUSDR Communication Strategy

2.1. Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan

Since the adoption of the first EUSDR Action Plan in 2010, EUSDR Priority Areas have addressed common socio-economic, structural and political challenges of the Danube Region through building and strengthening EUSDR networks and implementing targeted projects and processes. To facilitate the effective implementation of the Strategy, the Priority Area's targets, as formulated in 2012, already underwent a first update in 2016.

Nevertheless, after several years of implementing the EUSDR, various challenges became more and more present on the political agenda, which can only be solved on transnational level (e.g. related to digitalisation, protection of ecological systems, education, transport, climate change, demographic change, migration) and thus EUSDR National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators agreed on a comprehensive revision of the Action Plan in May 2018.⁴

The draft **revised version of the EUSDR Action Plan** was **formulated in a bottom-up process in a two-stage consultation phase**: In the **first stage** PACs and their Steering Groups provided a retrospective appraisal of actions, cross-cutting issues, possible cooperation fields and a general outlook in their respective fields of expertise. The Danube Strategy Point collected these inputs and summarised them until the end of January 2019⁵. At the same time the Romanian EUSDR Presidency launched questionnaires, addressing both NCs and PACs and collecting first feedback on the envisaged revision timeline, potential changes in governance, potential horizontal topics to be addressed and on different options how to organise the revision process. In the **second stage** of the consultation process, DSP collected proposals from NCs and PACs for the future governance of the EUSDR, future strategic objectives and the envisaged interplay with European funding facilities as well as proposals of revised actions from the PACs and their respective Steering Groups. At the same time the DSP launched a public online consultation on the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan from April to May 2019 to strengthen participatory governance. The results of this consultation were presented at the Annual Forum on 27th June 2019 in Bucharest (RO), at which occasion also a public hearing on the revision of the Action Plan was held (see chapter 2.4). On the basis of these inputs, the Danube Strategy Point

⁴ Also see EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018, p.9.

⁵ 'Summary of the PACs proposals to the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan – Outcomes of the consultation phase on the guidance note of the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency'

elaborated the **Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan**, in consultation with the Strategy's TRIO Presidency (National Coordinators of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia) and the European Commission. It summarises in the first part the necessity of a revision and the results of the EUSDR Operational Evaluation (see chapter 2.3) to be considered in the revision process. It also underlines the relevance of a solid EUSDR Communication Strategy (including an EUSDR narrative) and derives strategic objectives from identified spatial trends in the Danube Region to be included in the revised AP. In its second part, the document offers a draft list of revised targets, actions and projects for each Priority Area.

The Consolidated Input proposes the following to be considered by DG REGIO in the new Action Plan:

- It offers a streamlined and concentrated orientation framework with 85 actions instead of the previous 137 actions in the 2010 document. This corresponds to a concentration of actions by 40%.
- It offers a more focused strategic approach, indicating the overlaps and synergies between the Priority Areas' objectives on the one hand, and EU Cohesion Policy provisions as well as sector-relevant strategies on European level, on the other hand. At the same time it serves as a solid basis for concrete activities.
- Indicating the compatibility of EUSDR objectives, actions and targets with EU Cohesion Policy provisions (specifically the Policy Objectives of the new programme period 2021-2027), the revised Action Plan serves as a basis for the Embedding of the EUSDR into EU programmes after 2021, especially with regards to:
 - a) the Cohesion policy programmes – i.e. national/regional/territorial programmes under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Social Fund (ESF), Cohesion Fund (CF), and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF), as regulated in the draft Common Provisions Regulation (CPR);
 - b) Other EU funding instruments and programmes, like the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II/III), the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI)/ Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), LIFE, Horizon Europe, etc.;
 - c) National/regional/local funding of the Danube Region Strategy participating states.
- Taking into account the Policy Objectives under the draft Common Provisions Regulation, IPA and NDICI post-2020, the Consolidated Input rests on five strategic EUSDR objectives:
 - a) Counteracting Climate Change
 - b) Stimulating Sustainable Development
 - c) Establishing and enforcing Knowledge Society, stimulating the Economy and fight Poverty
 - d) Improving Mobility and Connectivity
 - e) Enhancing Democracy, sound Administration and strong Involvement of Civil Society and Youth
- Finally, the Consolidated Input defines a horizontal frame made up of three challenges which are to be addressed in all 12 Priority Areas:
 - a) Digitalisation
 - b) Migration and Demographic Change
 - c) Climate Change⁶

⁶ This third horizontal frame is not yet included in the Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan (as submitted to the European Commission in July 2019). It was added by EC at a later stage.

The meetings among National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators, DTP, EC and DSP held in the process of revising the EUSDR Action Plan are listed in Table 1. In addition several National Coordinators organised national or regional events, such as a public information day for regional stakeholders organised in Baden-Württemberg (DE) and a national online consultation organised by the Hungarian NC.

The Consolidated Input, as elaborated by EUSDR core stakeholders, submitted to EC as basis for the draft revised EUSDR Action Plan on 11th July 2019, after endorsement of EUSDR NCs. Until December 2019 DG REGIO elaborated a final version of the revised Action Plan to undergo inter-services consultation and finalisation within the European Commission and to subsequently be transmitted to the European Parliament, the Council, the EESC and the Committee of the Regions by spring 2020.

2.2. EUSDR Embedding

As the EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 shows, the issue of aligning EUSDR actions with EU programmes has been on the Strategy's agenda for many years. Already in 2015 the Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region was established, following the Meeting of Ministers in charge of EU Funds, European Affairs and European Integration⁷ held within the framework of the EUSDR Annual Forum in Ulm. The network has been active since then, sharing know-how and experience to foster transnational cooperation between ESF projects and to establish close links to EUSDR structures. However, with the EUSDR Action Plan revision (as outlined above) and the upcoming programme period 2021-2027, EUSDR embedding turned into a top priority:

Following the timeframe of the 'Roadmap towards the revision of the 2010 Action Plan' provided by the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency in 2018, NCs and PACs had identified under the Romanian EUSDR Presidency in which way the EUSDR Action Plan needed to be revised by the end of 2018. In early 2019 Priority Area Coordinators continued this process and correlated their thematic priorities with the five Policy Objectives of the proposed Cohesion Policy legislation (Common Provisions Regulation) for 2021-2027. The results were presented at the PAC meeting in January 2019. This matching is also reflected in the final version of the revised EUSDR Action Plan in each of the Priority Areas' chapters. Also, the Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan⁸, as submitted by the DSP to the European Commission in July 2019, summarises the interplay of the EUSDR with European funding facilities on a more operational level.

Intense embedding efforts started with the beginning of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency in November 2019: Creating synergies between macro-regional strategies and Cohesion Policy will be one of the priorities of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency, as announced in their programme as second political objective⁹. National Coordinators first discussed this priority at the NC meeting in November 2019, namely on the basis of the *Discussion Paper Embedding* provided by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency in

⁷ Further information: <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/esf-network-danube-region/>

⁸ Danube Strategy Point (2019): Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan, p.35 ff: Online: https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/EUSDR_Consolidated-Input-Document_AP-Revision_2019.pdf

⁹ <https://eusdr2020.hr/en/program/>

preparation of the NC meeting held in November 2019. The paper breaks down the process of EUSDR embedding into the following steps:

- Analysis of the needs of the Danube Region by EUSDR key implementers
- Agreement between the authorities responsible for ESI and IPA funds and EUSDR key implementers to embed the macro-regional priorities in the Partnership Agreements and the IPA programming framework
- Decision on indicative shortlist of macro-regional priorities to be proposed for inclusion in the Partnership Agreements and the IPA programming framework and embedding of these shortlisted priorities into Partnership Agreements and in the IPA programming framework for the period 2021-2027
- Measuring the progress of implementation & effectiveness of embedding

EUSDR National Coordinators concluded this first discussion on embedding under the Croatian EUSDR Presidency with the agreement to establish a Task Force Embedding (TF DR-EMB), consisting of EUSDR National Coordinators and partly representatives of managing/programming authorities, with support of INTERACT and the DSP, which will pick up the above listed tasks in the course of 2020.

Next to these efforts on Strategy level, EUSDR participating states also started preparing for the 2021-2027 programming process on national level:



- The Hungarian National Coordination together with the Hungarian PAC 5 commissioned a study called “W2020+ Comprehensive national database of potential cross-border and international water management project elements” for project planning and cost estimation, which was shared with the managing authorities of CBC-programmes in Hungary.
- In Austria the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions and Tourism commissioned a study for the purpose of identifying and prioritising transnational cooperation themes in alignment with spatial planning priorities in Austria. The study offers recommendations in view of several funds and programmes (ERDF, cross-border and transnational programmes, ESF etc.). Its first draft was discussed within a national stakeholder workshop in December 2019 and the study will be used in the course of national discussions in programming groups.
- Likewise, the Government Office of the Slovak Republic commissioned a study on the alignment of EUSDR priorities with the use of EU funds in Slovakia in the upcoming programming period. This study was already elaborated in 2018 and several meetings with managing authorities of mainstream programmes and the Slovak National Coordinator were held as part of the process.



- Several meetings of authorities in charge of MRS and cross-border programmes with ERDF and ESF managing authorities were also held in Baden-Württemberg.
- The National Coordinator representative in Bavaria is part of the IGJ/ERDF monitoring committee, ensuring coordination of activities in line with the EUSDR.

- Similarly, in Hungary the National Coordinator takes part in meetings of several national Operational Programmes and CBC Programmes as observer and, in particular, took part in the 2021-2027 Programming Committees of several programmes.
- In Montenegro the National Coordinator held first consultations with IPA programming authorities and with the EU Delegation to Montenegro in order to incorporate both EUSDR and EUSAIR priorities in the respective programming documents.
- In Slovenia preparations for the new programming period were made on a bigger scale, namely in the format of a Financial Dialogue on MRS embedding in Slovenia with managing authorities and Intermediate Bodies. Also, a Slovenian Advisory Group on transnational cooperation programmes with representatives from different ministries and sectors as well as the EUSDR National Coordinator was established in 2019.
- In Ukraine the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan coincided with the development of the draft State Strategy for Regional Development, the draft State Programme for Development of Cross-border Cooperation and the draft Plan for the Implementation of the State Strategy for Regional Development – all aligned with the EU programming period and to be implemented from 2021 to 2027. This facilitated a first review of the state of EUSDR implementation in Ukraine and the incorporation of EUSDR priorities in national documents.



2.3. EUSDR Monitoring & Evaluation

A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy is essential in order to keep up with progress achieved and lessons learned (on operational/technical and on policy level) as well as in terms of accountability. In this respect, National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators together with the Danube Strategy Point had agreed on a two-step Evaluation Plan for the EUSDR at the NC-PAC meeting in December 2018: The first step being an operational/governance evaluation (carried out in 2019) and the second step being an impact/policy evaluation (to be carried out in 2021).

To carry out this **Evaluation Plan** and to support the set-up of the EUSDR monitoring & evaluation system, the **Steering Group (SG) DANUVAL** was founded in the beginning of 2019. This Steering Group consists of Priority Area Coordinators (one PAC per Pillar), National Coordinators (including the TRIO Presidency as well as other NCs), representatives from DG REGIO and the Joint Research Centre, ESPON, DTP and DSP. As a first task, SG DANUVAL specified the terms and conditions for the procurement of the **Operational Evaluation** in a meeting in Bucharest (RO) on 14th February 2019. As a result of the procurement procedure carried out by the Danube Strategy Point, the consulting company Metis - with long-standing experience in the analysis and evaluation of territorial cooperation and MRS - was commissioned with the assignment. The Operational Evaluation was published in July 2019¹⁰. It focused on the effectiveness, communication and stakeholder involvement of the EUSDR and is based on desk research, an online survey and semi-structured telephone interviews.

¹⁰ Further information: <https://danube-region.eu/2019/07/the-final-report-on-the-eusdr-operational-evaluation-has-been-published/>.

The Operational Evaluation measured the strategic dimension, governance dimension (operational level) and cross-cutting and transversal issues. Some excerpts from the key findings and conclusions are presented below.

- The findings of the evaluation indicate that there have been **achievements** of the EUSDR at **strategic level**. Major concrete achievements are the set-up of cooperation structures and new partnerships. However, the evaluation also identified a need to work more towards “political results” to further raise the political interest.
- In the online survey, questions on the level of change triggered by the EUSDR in different policy fields, on the impact of the EUSDR on national or regional laws, regulations and organisational structures as well as on planning processes reached a mean score between 2.6 and 3.2 on a scale from 1 (no change/impact) to 6 (high level of change/impact). The consideration of the EUSDR in bilateral/international issues/cooperation was ranked higher (mean 3.7).
- Not only at strategic but also at **operational level** it is important that respective stakeholders are involved sufficiently. The evaluation findings indicate that the current state of play is satisfactory but with room for improvement. In many cases the persons sent to SG meetings lack the mandate to take decisions, which impedes decision-making processes. Also the involvement of additional stakeholders (e.g. cities, chambers and academia) was suggested in order to increase the added value and impact of the activities.
- Key success factors for an efficient **involvement of the Steering Group** in the PA are high-level political commitment, ownership and leadership, as well as regular and proactive participation at meetings. Common projects and actions are also considered as a major success factor in terms of mobilising internal forces and attracting political interest.
- There have been **structural and institutional changes** brought forward by the EUSDR, like a new service office and inter-ministerial consultation groups. However, according to the perception of the interviewees, the outreach and spill-over from the SG meetings to the **national level** still has potential. According to the perception of the interview partners, the outcomes of the SG meetings are not sufficiently transmitted to the national level. The reported exemplary achievements related to institutional change could be more extensive.
- **Staff fluctuation** limits the strategic outreach, the options for concrete action and is a major obstacle to anchor and stabilise institutional cooperation. A stable institutional memory is required in order to counteract the adverse effects. This issue has been addressed by re-establishing the Danube Strategy Point.
- In order to safeguard efficient and synergetic implementation procedures, well-functioning **workflows and processes among key actors** are vital prerequisites. The participants of the online-survey assessed the general workflows/processes as satisfying, sufficiently transparent and rather formal than informal. The best assessment was reached at PA level, followed by the EUSDR level. Lower ratings are found at national level. The efforts that are needed to ensure the workflows/processes in relation to the outcome are assessed relatively high at all levels.
- **Projects and activities of strategic value** are an important tool for making results visible. In this context, Interact has highlighted the concept of ‘project chains’, which are projects that are interlinked (e.g. topics within a PA or a pillar, projects across funding schemes or with national/regional projects or activities). This implies that Coordinators of a PA actively build, implement and monitor such linkages. Good EUSDR examples are the DREAM project or Danube Parks.

- In general, the participants of the online-survey are relatively satisfied with the EUSDR **communication flows**. This is the case mainly at PA level and at EUSDR level. At national level the satisfaction rate is lower. Overall, the **communication and PR tools** meet the information needs on the EUSDR: The EUSDR Annual Forum, the website (www.danube-region.eu) and the PA specific websites achieved the highest satisfaction rates.

As a further step to build up a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system, Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators together with the DSP started to elaborate a **PAC reporting template**, with emphases being on:

- Developments in the reporting period
- Policy impact
- Governance
- Projects and funding
- Opportunities and challenges

The first draft reporting template was discussed in depth at the PAC meeting in Bucharest (RO) in January 2019 and was subsequently revised by the Danube Strategy Point with the help of PACs' inputs and feedback. The DSP also consulted PACs and NCs individually in order to improve the draft reporting template. The first reporting was expected to take place in mid-2020¹¹.

Finally, EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators and the Danube Strategy Point were in close exchange with **ESPON**, supporting the programme in the preparation of the **European and Macro-Regional Territorial Monitoring Tool**. Specifically, PACs and NCs provided their expertise in the selection and reduction of indicators and the Danube Strategy Point ensured coordination of the tool with EUSDR internal processes, such as EUSDR monitoring and the Action Plan revision, and gave feedback on the data sets used. As described in the inception report from July 2018, the EMTM tool is to:

*"[...] support European, macro-regional, national and regional policy makers and other stakeholders with territorial information, data, maps, graphs, analytical features and short reports. By reading and interpreting the quantitative statistical information in the light of policy objectives and aims, the [tool] shall help policy makers to monitor development trends and policy performance, identify development opportunities and territorial challenges, as well as better understand the diversity and position (benchmarking) of regions and cities in the heterogeneous European context."*¹²

The first workshop on the ESPON monitoring tool with EUSDR stakeholders in December 2019 was followed by a stakeholder meeting on 4th April 2019 in Vienna (AT). This meeting took place under the title *"From evidence to action: territorial trends and challenges identified in the ESPON projects"* and served the purpose of discussing the feasibility of gathering the necessary data for all countries in the Strategy and covering all topics¹³. It also highlighted the difficulty of measuring the contribution of activities and projects to the Strategy's objectives. Participants of the meeting, among them EUSDR NCs and PACs, voiced the following aspects to be considered in the set-up of the tool:

¹¹ As communicated at the PAC Meeting in January 2019

¹² <https://www.espon.eu/macoregional-monitor>

¹³ Further information: <https://www.espon.eu/danube>

- The priorities of the EUSDR will shift over time and the tool should be as flexible as possible in this respect.
- The tool could potentially be used for a feedback loop towards national statistical institutes on how to better prepare and collect data.
- Caution is necessary when making interpretations of indicator values. Contextual information is always relevant when interpreting numbers (e.g. bad connectivity in Northern Sweden can have a different meaning than in the centre of Romania). Also, the tool should not be used to infer causal links between Danube Region projects and changes in indicators.

A test version of the online tool¹⁴ and an interim report¹⁵ were shared in April 2019. In May 2019 ESPON shared a preliminary set of selected indicators per Priority Area¹⁶. The tool is to be finalised and launched in the course of 2020.

2.4. EUSDR Communication

For 2019 several Priority Area Coordinators highlighted good internal communication within their Steering Group and/or Working Group members, with the Danube Strategy Point and the European Commission. However, for coordinated and effective external communication and to reach target groups such as civil society organisations, local and regional governments as well as social partners, a comprehensible and tangible EUSDR narrative along with other tailor-made communication tools is vital. This is especially relevant when it comes to initiating policy processes and high quality projects.

In this regard, the Danube Strategy Point drafted a comprehensive EUSDR Communication Strategy including a visual identity, communication tools and a Communication Guide, which are to be used by all EUSDR stakeholders, adapted to their needs and the identified target groups. Priority Area Coordinators underlined the need for communication tools in a capacity survey carried out by the Danube Strategy Point in January 2019.

Having elaborated the first draft of the EUSDR Communication Strategy and having received first comments by NCs and PACs already by the end of 2018, the Danube Strategy Point held a first online workshop on 5th March 2019. This workshop was dedicated to a common vision regarding the objectives to be reached through the Communication Strategy and the most important target groups for disseminating information. Subsequently, an external expert was contracted by the Danube Strategy Point to provide support in developing the draft EUSDR Communication Strategy further, including an EUSDR narrative and a Communication Guide as integral part of the Communication Strategy. With the help of the external expert, two online workshops in September and October 2019 were held. In these workshops NCs and PACs focused on revising the communication objectives and the target audiences identified so far, formulating effective messages related to the interests of the identified target groups, identifying communication channels and methods as well as roles and responsibilities in the communication process.

¹⁴ <http://emtm-tool.org/emtm-tool/index.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.espon.eu/macoregional-monitor>

¹⁶ <https://www.espon.eu/macoregional-monitor>

A final EUSDR communication workshop took place in Zagreb (HR) in December 2019¹⁷. The workshop had a twofold approach: 1) to discuss key elements of the elaborated Communication Strategy, such as a potential EUSDR vision, mission statement and slogan, and 2) to enhance the capacity of the participating PACs and NCs in the field of strategic communication. After carrying out a final EUSDR stakeholder internal decision round on the EUSDR vision, mission statement, slogan and narrative, the EUSDR Communication Strategy is to be endorsed in 2020.

In parallel to this EUSDR internal process, Slovenian MRS representatives, together with the Interact programme and the European Commission, started a facilitation process for the communication of macro-regional strategies at the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-regional Strategies Week 2018 in Slovenia. In the framework of this process, the Interact programme subsequently organised a communication workshop dedicated to MRS communication managers on the topic of “How to communicate macro-regional strategies” held in Izola (SI) in September 2019¹⁸.

Within the EUSDR, Bulgaria and Hungary have set positive examples when it comes to television campaigns: The Hungarian NC was interviewed live for the Romanian Television in October 2019 and previously a EUSDR information campaign was run on the Bulgarian National Television in 2018).

Further communication activities by Priority Area Coordinators, National Coordinators and the Danube Strategy Point are summarised in Figure 2:

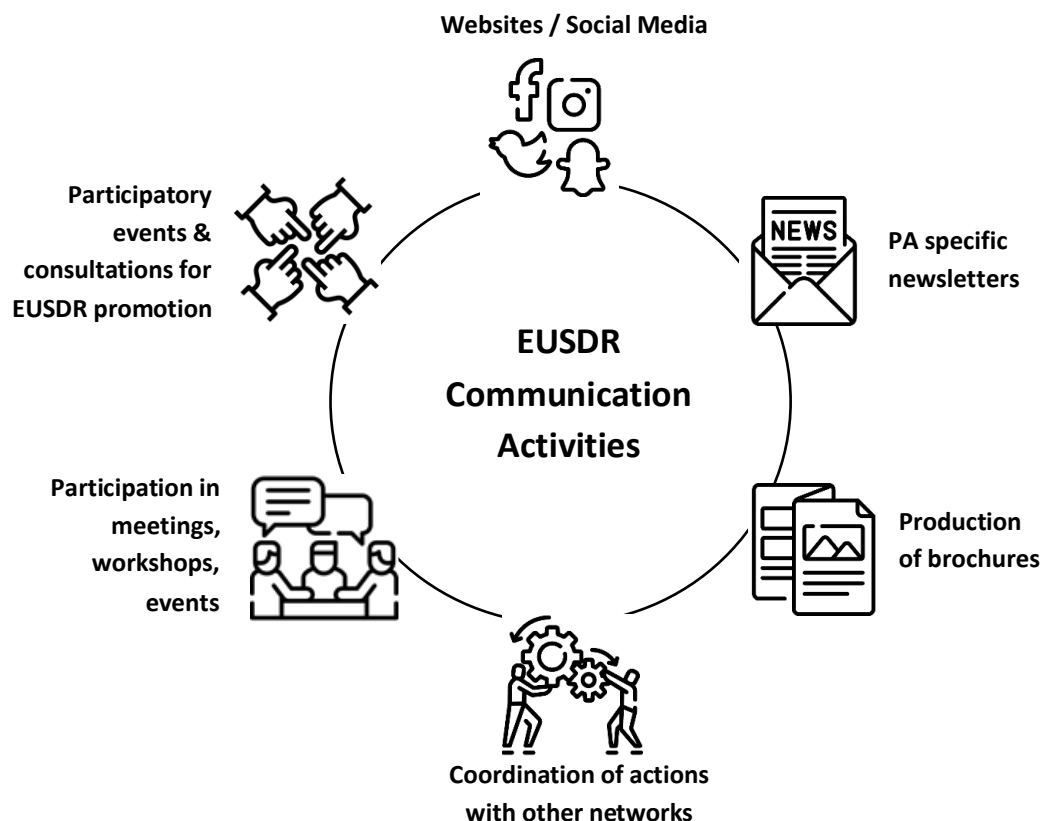


Figure 2: EUSDR Communication Activities 2019 (Source of icons: Flaticon.com)

¹⁷ More information on this workshop from PA 4 perspective available here: <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/participation-in-the-communication-workshop-organized-by-the-danube-strategy-point-in-cooperation-with-the-eusdr-croatian-presidency-in-zagreb/>.

¹⁸ Further information: <http://www.interact-eu.net/events/how-communicate-macro-regional-strategies-0>.



Online presence and communication was strengthened by the Danube Strategy Point through streamlining the design and domains of all Priority Area websites and relaunching the main EUSDR website under the domain <https://danube-region.eu/> in autumn 2019.

Most Priority Areas have not only published their latest news on processes, projects, events, funding possibilities and publications on their specific PA websites, they have also forwarded information to the Danube Strategy Point for dissemination on the main EUSDR website and via EUSDR social media channels (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter). The Danube Strategy Point established several social media channels for the promotion of the Danube Region Strategy: Facebook (with 3,125 followers by the end of 2019), LinkedIn (1,841 followers by the end of 2019), Twitter (1080 followers by the end of 2019) and YouTube (follower base to be built up), on which it promotes activities of EUSDR core stakeholders.¹⁹ The Facebook campaign "This week story", based on the contribution of PACs and project beneficiaries, attracted a large number of followers and, as a result, the EUSDR online community grew considerably.

In addition several Priority Areas have their own social media channels, such as PA specific pages and accounts on Facebook²⁰, twitter²¹, LinkedIn²², YouTube²³, Instagram²⁴ and they make sure to post PA related news on national websites, e.g. on ministerial websites. Similarly, the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK), the Czech Office of the Government, the Hungarian Government and the Government of the Slovak Republic dedicate one part of their websites to MRS²⁵.



PA specific newsletters are sent out by several PAs²⁶. Furthermore, in 2019 promotional brochures were produced for single PAs as well as across PAs, see links in the footnote section below²⁷ and the Danube Strategy Point published the brochure "EU Strategy for the Danube Region – cooperation one can see" in English and in all languages of the Danube Region, presenting concrete measures taken and projects implemented in the framework of the Danube Region Strategy.²⁸



Within the reporting period several PAs communicated and coordinated their actions with the Thematic Poles of the Capitalisation Strategy of the Danube Transnational Programme²⁹, which they used as an effective communication channel. Also, PA 10 and

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/DanubeRegionStrategy/>
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/eusdr/>
<https://www.youtube.com/user/DanubeRegionStrategy/>
<https://twitter.com/eusdr>

²⁰ For example: PA 3, PA 7, PA 9, PA 10

²¹ For example: PA 5/HU

²² For example: PA 5/HU

²³ For example: PA 10

²⁴ For example: PA 7

²⁵ AT: <https://www.oerok.gv.at/kooperationen/portal-makroregionale-strategien/makroregionale-strategien-allgemein>
CZ: <https://www.vlada.cz/en/evropske-zalezitosti/evropske-politiky/podunajska-strategie/the-eu-strategy-for-the-danube-region-eusdr-151489/>
HU: <https://dunaregiostrategia.kormany.hu/>
SK: <https://www.dunajskastrategia.vlada.gov.sk/strategia-eu-pre-dunajsky-region/>

²⁶ For example: PA 1a, PA 2, PA 6, PA 9 and PA 10

²⁷ PA 4 brochure on 'Plastic Pollution of Rivers in the Danube Region – Best Practices towards Reduction of Plastic Pollution'
PA 4 / PA 5 brochure on 'Success Stories 2017-2019'

PA 9 on its main objectives in 2019 including '8 Actions in the fields of Labour Market, Social Policy, Education and Training'

²⁸ <https://danube-region.eu/communication-tools/publications/>

²⁹ For example PA 7: <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/dtp-capitalisation-strategy/>
Or PA 9 as coordinators of Thematic Poles 9 and 10, see chapter 3.3.



PA 9 highlighted their coordination with the Network of ESF managing authorities in the Danube Region. PA 10 further underlined its coordination with the Network against Trafficking in Human Beings as effective communication channel.



Furthermore, several Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators underlined their participation in various meetings, workshops and events as important communication opportunities. This includes participation in the 8th edition of the EUSDR Annual Forum in Bucharest and events organised by other Priority Areas, as well as:

- local/national platform meetings or Danube Region relevant events (Annual Assembly of the Hungarian Hidrological Society; “Europe Action Day” / Europaaktionstag in Stuttgart (GE); the annual „Danube Salon” / Donausalon held in the framework of the International Tourism Fair in Berlin (GE); the biennial Danube Festival in Ulm / Neu-Ulm (GE) etc.) and
- international platform meetings (Danube Cooperation Forum; Danubiana Network; EU4MYREGION; 7th ASEM Sustainable Development Dialogue; EU Western Balkans Cluster Policy Learning and Matchmaking Event; meeting of volunteer firefighter representatives from HU, SK, RS, RO organised by the Budapest Firefighter Association; etc.).

EUSDR communication towards representatives of local, regional and national public administrations and civil society organisations is further facilitated through National Participation Days with the joint support of PA 10 and the Danube Civil Society Forum. The purpose of National Participation Days is to strengthen participatory governance for regional development in the Danube Region. Danube Participation Days were held in 11 of 14 EUSDR participating states in 2019.

To further strengthen external communication and participatory governance, the Danube Strategy Point organised a public online consultation on the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan, running from April to May 2019. The consultation³⁰ yielded 89 responses from 12 of the 14 Danube Region states and from representatives with diverse backgrounds (civil society organisations, social partners, local and regional administrations, academia, project implementers and professional regional planners). The main results of the online consultation were:

- 1) Emphasis should be put on strengthening cooperation and funding (micro-funding!) in the Danube Region.
- 2) Dissemination and flow of information should be strengthened in all directions (top-down and bottom-up).
- 3) Continuity of EUSDR actors on the administrative level should be secured.
- 4) Involvement of the local and regional level in MRS should be strengthened.
- 5) Youth involvement in the EUSDR should be strengthened.
- 6) Thematic emphasis should be put on: dual education, life-long-learning, tackling climate change, sustainable energy sources and sustainable transport and infrastructure.

These results were presented at the ‘Public Hearing on the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan’ at the 8th edition of the EUSDR Annual Forum on 27th June 2019³⁰, organised by the DSP. Both the inputs from the online consultation and the public hearing were incorporated by PACs and NCs in the final steps of the Action Plan revision process in the second half of 2019.

All in all, the elaboration of the EUSDR Communication Strategy, efforts made across MRS to streamline communication and the public consultation along with the public hearing in the framework of the Action Plan revision illustrate very well how communication capacities have been strengthened and extended during the reporting period. In the next section an overview is presented on how organisational capacity was strengthened within the EUSDR and across MRS in 2019.

³⁰ Read more on the outcome of the public online consultation and the “Public Hearing on the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan” here: <https://danube-region.eu/2019/07/public-hearings-and-online-consultation-reports-on-the-revision-of-the-eusdr-action-plan/>

2.5. EUSDR Capacity Building

The manifold capacity building activities within the EUSDR can be divided in EUSDR internal capacity building, capacity building with the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, capacity building on national level and capacity building across macro-regional strategies:

As for **internal capacity building**, the focus lay on the administrative issue of defining Rules of Procedure (RoP) for Priority Area Coordinators. These rules were drafted by the EUSDR Presidency and the DSP on the basis of the National Coordinators' Rules of Procedure and with support from DG REGIO. The Rules of Procedure define how PAC meetings are scheduled and how the agenda is drafted, they define who may participate in PAC meetings and how decisions are made. The PAC Rules of Procedure were finalised at the PAC meeting on 22nd January 2019 and were endorsed by PACs via written procedure on 11th February 2019 and subsequently by NCs on 4th March 2019. Following the definition of the RoP for PACs, the Croatian EUSDR Presidency proposed in November 2019 to update the National Coordinators' Rules of Procedure and presented a first draft of the updated document, jointly elaborated with the DSP, at the NC meeting on 21st and 22nd November in Zagreb (HR). The endorsement of this document is scheduled for 2020.

As for the **shared capacity of the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme with the Danube Region Strategy**, DTP carried out the 2nd (closed) Call for PAC projects from 6th August 2019 to 8th October 2019. The clearing phase regarding the institutional set-up of PAs was supported by the DSP and finally submitted to DTP by the Presidency. All 12 PAC teams submitted their proposals, of which 11 proposals were approved with conditions and the invitation to make final adjustments until 24th January 2020³¹. One PA proposal was to be re-submitted in 2020. The main aim of the PAC projects is the provision of a stable and effective governance system within EUSDR Priority Areas. In this context, the Coordinators could choose a maximum of three specific objectives from a total of five³². The implementation of the second PAC projects will start on 1st January 2020.

Another tool to strengthen the shared capacity of EUSDR and DTP is the **DTP Capitalisation Strategy**³³. As reported by the Croatian National Coordination, the Capitalisation Strategy is used by PA 8, PA 7 and PA 9 to identify relevant cross-cutting topics, since activities of PA 8 (Competitiveness) are strongly interrelated with those of PA 7 (Knowledge Society) and PA 9 (People & Skills), for example, in the fields of education, bio-economy, smart specialisation and cluster development. Another PA 8 activity under the DTP Capitalisation Strategy was the event Fostering Female Entrepreneurship in the Danube Region, held in Varaždin (HR)³⁴. Furthermore, DTP Capitalisation Strategy helped in reaching new stakeholders for the newly established PA 8 Working Groups Digital Danube and Female Entrepreneurship. Finally, PA 4 volunteered to take on the leadership of the DTP Capitalisation Pole 4 – Water Management.

³¹ DTP presentation, NC meeting 11/2019; and DTP presentation PAC meeting 02/2020

³² 1) To support the Steering Groups in implementing the EUSDR PA; 2) To support communication and increased visibility of the PA and dissemination of PA's achievements; 3) To support policy development and policy initiatives as well as usage of cutting edge knowledge (EU/ international, as appropriate); 4) To enhance coordination between PA actors and to encourage involvement of key stakeholders in the PA activities; 5) To facilitate ongoing projects and the development of future project initiatives for the PA, specifically project generation, partner search and identification of funding opportunities for the PA stakeholders.

³³ Further information: <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/relevant-documents/dtp-capitalisation-strategy>

³⁴ Further information: <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/capitalization-event-fostering-female-entrepreneurship-in-the-danube-region/>

In the course of the EUSDR Action Plan revision and later on also during preparations for the 2nd PAC Call, new opportunities for a **stronger involvement of the EU candidate and neighbouring countries** (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine) in the Priority Areas emerged³⁵. On Strategy level, the Ukrainian Ministry of Infrastructure joined Priority Area 1b (Rail-Road-Air Mobility) and the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science joined PA 9 (People & Skills), which was also reflected in their tasks assumed as project partners in the 2nd PAC project proposals. Also, the Montenegrin Ministry of Tourism joined PA 3 (Culture & Tourism) and on project level was included as Associated Strategic Partner in the 2nd PAC project proposal of PA 3. Furthermore, Ukraine expressed its interest to take on the EUSDR Presidency for the year 2022 at the NC meeting in Zagreb (HR) in November 2019. Ukraine could be the first non-EU country taking on the EUSDR Presidency, which could be considered as an important step for the Strategy in deepening the involvement of non-EU countries within the EUSDR.³⁶

On national level, almost all EUSDR participating states have one or more coordination mechanisms and platforms for the implementation of the EUSDR in place³⁷:



Austria

- National Coordination Platform with all relevant stakeholders from the national and regional level (PACs, SG members, economic and social partners and NGOs)
- National Committee for Austrian participation in transnational Interreg programmes, including representatives of ministries, representatives from the regional and local level and economic and social partners



Bulgaria

- National High-Level Committee to ensure political commitment towards EUSDR objectives
- National Coordination Group to coordinate the implementation of the EUSDR in Bulgaria
- Participation of Bulgarian NC in Monitoring Committees for ESIF programmes and IPA to coordinate the programmes with the EUSDR



Croatia

- Subcommittee for the coordination of Croatian participation in Interreg programmes and MRS (including representatives of all ministries, different chambers and business associations, local authorities, regional development agencies, associations of cities and of counties, civil society organisations etc.)



Czech Republic

- Inter-ministerial coordination via the Office of the Government's European Affairs Section
- Inter-ministerial coordination sub-group chaired by the Czech NC for information exchange and nomination of Steering Group members in the 12 Priority Areas of the Strategy. Also national authorities responsible for Interreg programmes, the Permanent Representation

³⁵ The need for stronger cooperation between EU-member states and non-EU member states within the EUSDR was pointed out in the Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan. Furthermore, Ukraine expressed its readiness for stronger engagement in various PAs at the NC-PAC meeting in Bucharest in May 2019.

³⁶ The Danube Strategy Point facilitated the strengthened involvement of non-EU states within the Danube Region Strategy by presenting relevant information on the Strategy in the framework of the PA 9 workshop 'Solving future skills challenges in the Danube Region' held in Chisinau (MD) from 11-12 of June 2019, where representatives from four of the five EU candidate and neighbouring countries were present.

³⁷ Source of national flags: Flaticon.com / Source of Baden-Württemberg and Bavarian flags: nationalflaggen.de

of the Czech Republic to the EU and social partners are represented in this sub-group.



- Cross-sectoral and multi-level coordination of EUSDR activities through appointment of the State Minister as Special Envoy for the implementation of the EUSDR with support of the Danube Service Bureau at the State Ministry
- Inter-ministerial Working Groups involving all line-ministries, sometimes inviting selected project leads e.g. from the Danube Transnational Programme
- Several line ministries as well as the State Ministry dedicate sections of their websites to the EUSDR.



Bavaria

- Inter-ministerial meetings for exchange of information on activities, events, projects etc.
- Coordination amongst Bavarian NC and Bavarian SG members and Priority Area Coordinators of PA 6 and PA 11



Hungary

- Inter-ministerial Working Group on EUSDR for decision-support and information exchange (including PACs, SG members, Managing Authorities of national, cross-border and transnational programmes, local authorities, chamber of commerce, civil society and national representatives of international organisations)
- Participation of Hungarian NC in Monitoring Committees for national mainstream and CBC programmes to coordinate the programmes with the EUSDR



Moldova

- Inter-ministerial coordination established via the Moldovan Coordination Council for the EUSDR (in January 2019) consisting of State Secretaries responsible for initiating and promoting activities in the different Priority Areas of the Strategy. The State Secretary responsible for regional development is at the same time EUSDR National Coordinator and keeps an overview of the Moldovan participation in all 12 Priority Areas.
- Regional Development Agencies share information on the EUSDR with representatives from the non-governmental and private sectors and with local public administration.



Montenegro

- Visits to municipalities to communicate opportunities within the EUSDR by the European Integration Office in charge of Montenegrin representation in MRS together with representatives from transnational programmes and MRS.



Romania

- Inter-ministerial Working Group
- Consultative Council composed of representatives of the central and local public administration, business, academia and civil society organisations
- Continuous communication between the Romanian NC and the Romanian SG members regarding the implementation of the Strategy and concrete projects in Romania

- Coordination between the National Coordinator and Managing Authorities



Serbia

- Inter-ministerial coordination (not described in further detail)
- Involvement of subnational governments, academia and civil society organisations in thematic implementation on Priority Area and project level



Slovenia

- Annual elaboration of information report by the National Coordinators and relevant ministries on main achievements and implementation of the MRS in Slovenia to the Slovenian Government and, thereafter, provision of the report to the Slovenian Parliament; the parliamentary discussion of the report is broadcasted live on television.
- Joint stocktaking of the Slovenian key implementers of the EUSDR, EUSAIR and EUSALP at the end of each year.



Slovakia

- Inter-ministerial coordination via the EUSDR Consultation Group with representatives and experts from line-ministries
- Slovak National Commission for transnational cooperation programmes and MRS chaired by the Government Office of the Slovak Republic to provide assistance to Slovak members of programme Monitoring Committees and of the EUSDR



Ukraine

- Within the reporting period the Ukrainian National Coordinator of the EUSDR was designated and a Coordinating Centre for the implementation of the EUSDR in Ukraine was established. The Coordinating Center is a temporary subsidiary body of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine to facilitate coherent actions by central and local authorities.
- Thematic round-table discussions to coordinate participation within the EUSDR and the Danube Transnational Programme

These coordination mechanisms can be seen as a reflection of the political commitment of EUSDR participating states, especially in the cases of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Baden-Württemberg, Hungary, Moldova, Slovenia and Slovak Republic with their high-level coordination mechanisms (see above).

As for **capacity building beyond the EUSDR**, cross-MRS collaboration was intensified with the support of Interact and the Danube Strategy Point being present at all meetings (see Table 2 below). Working Group Meetings on common MRS capacities as well as cross-MRS meetings of Thematic/Priority Area Coordinators were continued, namely on the topics of innovation capacity, energy, water management and biodiversity:

Table 2: Cross-MRS events and activities, facilitated or organised by Interact in 2019 ³⁸

Type	Date	Focus
Cross-cutting / horizontal issues, like communication, embedding and capacity building	26-27/03/2019	MRS – Strategic Framework for ESIF
	3/07/2019	Building common capacity support environment for enhanced implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies
	19/09/2019	How to communicate macro-regional strategies
	10/10/2019	Working Group meeting: Building common capacity support environment
Thematic cross-MRS coordinators / stakeholders meetings	23-24/01/2019	Cross MRS Meeting of Thematic Coordinators: New directions for macro-regions: unlocking innovation capacity and performance
	2-3/04/2019	Cross MRS Meeting of Thematic Coordinators: Energy priorities: potentials for cross macro-regional collaboration
	5/11/2019	Cross MRS Meeting of Thematic Coordinators: Building common cross-MRS collaboration platform on water: meeting of macro-regional coordinators
	4-5/12/2019	Cross MRS Meeting of Thematic Coordinators: Building common cross-MRS collaboration platform on biodiversity
Exchange across Interreg transnational programmes dedicated to support EU MRS	26/11/2019	Meeting of Interreg Transnational Programmes and DG REGIO Regarding Support to the EU Macro-Regional Strategies
Annual Fora of the EU macro-regional strategies workshop		<i>During the reporting period Interact organised and co-organised workshops in the framework of the Annual Fora of the EUSALP, EUSBSR and EUSDR ("ESIF programmes and EUSDR objectives in the framework of the new Cohesion Policy" on 28/06/2019 in Romania).</i>
Promoting / explaining coordination and cooperation		<i>Throughout 2019 Interact continuously worked to promote coordination across EU funding programmes to better address common challenges. The activity is also linked to work on MRS. A comprehensive list of events is available here. More information & documents are available here.</i>
	22-23/05/2019	Interreg Annual Event 2019 : Workshop 2: Territorial Approach in the new Interreg Programmes – Interact presentation on "Macro-region: framework for territorial development"
		<i>Interact publications can be found here.</i>

Within the EUSDR seven of fourteen countries are also part of two of the other three MRS (see Table 3), which makes cross-MRS coordination easier in these cases.

Table 3: Participation of EUSDR countries in other MRS

	EUSDR	AT	BA	DE	HR	ME	RS	SI
OTHER MRS				(BW & BY)				
EUSAIR			●		●	●	●	●
EUSALP		●		●				●
EUSBSR								

In the cases of Austria, Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, for example, participation in the EUSDR and EUSALP is closely coordinated, since in all three cases the responsibilities for national coordination of

³⁸ Further information and most recent activities of Interact can be followed here: <http://www.interact-eu.net/>

both strategies lie in the same unit. In Croatia the same National Coordinator is responsible for the EUSDR and EUSAIR, as is also the case in Montenegro for the Deputy National Coordinator. Also, in Montenegro (Thematic) Steering Group members for both strategies are in touch through informal communication. In Serbia several EUSDR Steering Group members are also members of EUSAIR Thematic Steering Groups, which facilitates cross-MRS coordination. Finally, Slovenia is a special case as it is part of three MRS - EUSDR, EUSAIR and EUSALP – with one National Coordinator responsible for all three MRS. A major cross-MRS event in Slovenia is the annual Mediterranean Coast and EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to bring together Slovenian MRS implementers from different sectors and all levels of governance as well as entrepreneurs, civil society and youth representatives and social activists. In 2019 the event was held from 17th to 28th September in Izola (SI). One focus of the event was on preparing the upcoming programming process for the EU programme period 2021-2027, mainly within the scope of the EUSAIR. Another focus was on cross-MRS exchange on communication, including a communication workshop in which first ideas on a cross-MRS narrative and vision were gathered (see Interact workshop “How to communicate macro-regional strategies” as described above in chapter 2.4).

3. Developments and Achievements in Priority Areas

In 2019 a total of 22 Steering Group meetings was held across the 12 Priority Areas in the Danube Region Strategy. The agenda of these meetings can be looked up under “More information” (see Table 4).

Table 4: List of Steering Group meetings in 2019

Priority Area	SG meeting	Date & Place	More information
PA 1a	16 th SG Meeting	26/06/2019 in Bucharest (RO)	https://navigation.danube-region.eu/steering-group/
	17 th SG Meeting	04/12/2019 in Brussels (BE)	
PA 1b	18 th SG Meeting	26/03/2019 in Belgrade (RS)	https://transport.danube-region.eu/steering-group/
	19 th SG Meeting	23-24/09/2019 at Portorož (SI)	
PA 2	18 th SG Meeting	10/07/2019 in Prague (CZ)	https://energy.danube-region.eu/steering-group/
	19 th SG Meeting	03/12/2019 in Budapest (HU)	
PA 3	18 th SG Meeting	26/06/2019 in Bucharest (RO)	https://cultureandtourism.danube-region.eu/
	19 th SG Meeting	28/11/2019 in Sofia (BG)	
PA 4	17 th SG Meeting	16/04/2019 in Bratislava (SK)	https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/meetings/
	18 th SG Meeting	04/11/2019 in Budapest (HU)	
PA 5	15 th SG Meeting	16/05/2019 in Bucharest (RO)	https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/files/
	16 th SG Meeting	17-18/12/2019 in Budapest (HU)	
PA 6	12 th SG Meeting	05-06/11/2019 in Plitvice (HR)	https://nature.danube-region.eu/12th-steering-group-meeting/
PA 7	17 th SG Meeting	11/06/2019 in Vienna (AT)	https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/documents/
	18 th SG Meeting	04/12/2019 in Belgrade (RS)	
PA 8	16 th SG Meeting	19/09/2019 in Zagreb (HR)	https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/news/page/3/
PA 9	16 th SG Meeting	09-10/05/2019 in Vienna (AT)	https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/past-events/
	17 th SG Meeting	25/10/2019 in Chisinau (MD)	
PA 10	16 th SG Meeting	20/05/2019 in Bucharest (RO)	https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/priority-area-10/priority-area-10-steering-group/
	17 th SG Meeting	11-12/11/2019 in Podgorica (ME)	
PA 11	16 th SG Meeting	24-25/06/2019 in Sofia (BG)	https://security.danube-region.eu/steering-group/
	17 th SG Meeting	05-06/12/2019 in Zagreb (HR)	

Steering Group meetings are valuable opportunities for Priority Area Coordinators and Steering Group members from all 14 participating states to discuss current developments in their field of expertise, to take decisions on the future course of action and to coordinate their actions across the Danube Region. In addition a lot of work is done on a daily basis by PACs and SG members throughout the year. The following chapters give an overview of these outputs and outcomes achieved as a result of these continuous efforts, sorted under each Priority Area by the categories ‘cooperation & policy embedding’, ‘highlights’ and ‘projects’.

3.1. Pillar 1 “Connecting the Danube Region”

Aiming to contribute to sustainable, inclusive and smart regional development through measures in the fields of transport, energy and culture and tourism, Pillar 1 of the Danube Region Strategy focuses on improving connectivity in the region. Joint efforts of the Danube Region countries in planning, financing and implementation have improved coordination in infrastructure works, operation of transport and energy systems, exchange of best practices on clean energy and promotion of Danube culture and tourism.



PA 1a: Waterway Mobility

Cooperation & policy embedding

EUSDR PA 1a continued close policy coordination in 2019. In doing so, PA 1a has been successfully fulfilling the **strategic intermediary role** between EU policy initiatives of the European Commission (DG MOVE, DG REGIO) on the one hand and project development (for the implementation of these policy initiatives) on the other. PA 1a thus continuously feeds the policy process through technical and fact-based inputs such as monitoring reports for further policy decisions in the field of Danube navigation. The topics and actions of PA 1a are already well positioned and **high on the political agenda**, ensuring stable policy embedding. In the field of greening and modernisation of the Danube fleet, a workshop with stakeholders and policy makers was organised, which resulted in a **consolidated policy recommendation on fleet modernisation**³⁹. This recommendation shall be fed into the ongoing deliberations on the implementation of the European Green Deal. In addition another Danube Ministerial meeting for 2020 was under preparation and is planned to feature ministerial conclusions. Hence, the series of conclusions directly related to the PA’s activities, which started in 2012 and were perpetuated in 2014, 2016 and 2018, will be continued.

PA 1a closely cooperates with stakeholders from the business industry, river commissions and the environment, to feed the process of project implementation and to achieve the EUSDR PA 1a targets. Apart from the cooperation with various stakeholders groups, PA 1a has strong links to the European Commission (especially with DG MOVE and DG REGIO) to enhance a **close policy coordination**. Following the Croatian EUSDR Presidency’s priority of EUSDR Embedding (see chapter 2.2), PA 1a prolifically discussed with representatives of DG REGIO as well as at national level and with the Steering Group how the strategic priorities and focus topics of PA 1a can be embedded into EU funding programmes.

Highlights

In the framework of coordinated waterway rehabilitation and maintenance activities until 2020, a proceeding focus was put on the **Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan** and the **FAIRway Danube project**⁴⁰, which are in place. Results are being continuously monitored through the

³⁹ Further information: https://navigation.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/sites/10/2020/11/2019-12-31_EUSDR_PA1a_Strategy_on_fleet_modernisation.pdf.

⁴⁰ Further information: <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/projects>; www.fairwaydanube.eu.

biennial National Action Plans, created in the framework of the *FAIRway Danube* project together with PA 1a⁴¹. For a better coordination in terms of developing efficient multimodal terminals at river ports and to foster the engagement in the development of the port network, an **inter-Pillar joint Working Group meeting** of PA 1a and PA 1b was organised. In addition the **inter-PA joint Working Group** of PA 1a & PA 11 continued their work optimising administrative processes connected to Danube navigation, for instance by harmonising administrative forms (so-called DAVID forms), which shall finally result in lower waiting times and more effective control procedures in Danube navigation. A meeting between EUSDR PA 1a and PA 11 Coordinators took place in December 2019, in order to review the activities carried out so far and to discuss the next steps for the introduction of the **DAVID forms**⁴² for border controls as well as the digitalisation of these forms. Another emphasis was put on the **linkage to reduce administrative barriers to the digitalisation efforts** undertaken in the CEF-funded **RIS COMEX project**⁴³, which actively addresses the international exchange of **River Information Services (RIS) data**. In this respect, PA 1a organised a Working Group meeting.

Progress was also achieved regarding greening technologies as PA 1a published the above mentioned **Strategy on Fleet Modernisation**, the **update of the project list** for the revised Rhine-Danube corridor work plans (as part of the Rhine-Danube Corridor initiative by the EC) and the scope to support to the **implementation of the Directive on professional qualifications** through a PA 1a Working Group meeting on Jobs & Skills.

It should also be mentioned that during the revision process of the EUSDR Action Plan in 2019, a new definition of the PA 1a targets was agreed with the PA 1a Steering Group⁴⁴.

Projects – implementation & monitoring

In 2019 the PA 1a **project database**⁴⁵ was constantly updated, monitoring more than 130 project ideas, running projects as well as implemented projects. Several filters ease searching for topical project information according to different criteria. Among the projects considered as of strategic value, *DANTE*, *DAPhNE* and *DanubeSTREAM* projects were successfully finished in 2019. Further strategically relevant project initiatives⁴⁶ with relevance for the EUSDR named under PA 1a were: *FAIRway Danube*, *Energy Barge*, *Danube SKILLS*, *COIN*, *Plastic Free Danube*, *DAREM*, *Iron Gate 1*, *MEASURES* and *GRENDDEL* and *GREEN DANUBE*. Furthermore, PA 1A issued a Letter of Recommendation to the High Performance Green Port Giurgiu project, attesting its strategic relevance for the port development. Generally, project initiatives within the thematic scope of PA 1a demonstrate a high success rate when it comes to accepted project applications.

⁴¹ See Reports of May and October 2019; also discussed among the Steering Group: <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/documents/>

⁴² Further information: <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/working-groups/wg-6-administrative-processes/>

⁴³ Further information: <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/working-groups/wg-6-administrative-processes/>

⁴⁴ See revised EUSDR Action Plan: <https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/EUSDR-ACTION-PLAN-SWD202059-final-1.pdf>

⁴⁵ Further information: <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/projects/>

⁴⁶ Further information: <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/projects/>



PA 1b: Rail-Road-Air Mobility

Cooperation & policy embedding

In 2019 PA 1b **intensified and further expanded their successful cooperation with international organisations** such as the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)⁴⁷, The European Road Assessment Programme (EuroRAP) with its non-profit entity the European Institute of Road Assessment (EIRA)⁴⁸, the Transport Community⁴⁹, the European Investment Bank (EIB)⁵⁰ and the Central European Initiative (CEI)⁵¹. In addition the excellent cooperation with the newly established Transport Community Treaty Permanent Secretariat (TCT PS) resulted in a solid initial cooperation of exchanging views, activities and expertise. These intensive policy-oriented cooperation structures are expressed, for example, in jointly organised workshops, study visits or participation in PA 1b SG meetings.

To support policy development and initiatives as well as making use of cutting edge knowledge PA 1b **closely cooperated with the European Commission** (DG MOVE, DG REGIO and DG NEAR). By following relevant initiatives and actively participating in various events, it is thus possible to address policies relevant to EU member states, candidate countries and neighbouring countries belonging to the Danube Region, such as the EU transport policy or the merging of EU and non-EU transport systems. In addition policy-oriented cooperation was continued at the macro-regional level, particularly with TSG2 of EUSAIR⁵², AG4 of EUSALP⁵³ and PA Transport of the EUSBSR⁵⁴.

Highlights

The main work in 2019 was based on processing the identified priorities, activities and tasks as planned in the DTP PAC project. As a general ongoing goal, PA 1b pursues the development of a **common transport vision** for the Danube Region and the preparation and approval of **master plans for road, rail and air transport links**. In addition PA 1b identified the **priority topics** to be confirmed by the Steering Group: road safety, the extension of TEN-T with the EUSDR network and cross border connectivity, transit transport including cross-border improvements (both technical and operational) as well as enhanced maintenance of secondary road networks. In the fields of road transport, a specific focus was put on linking secondary and tertiary roads to the TEN-T network, road maintenance and road safety. Further emphasis was put on improving the attractiveness and competitiveness of rail freight transport and supporting the enhancement of air connectivity. In horizontal terms, intermodal terminal and better logistic services, digitalisation in the transport sector and sustainable mobility in urban areas were also high on the agenda. In particular, two **international events** were organised by PA 1b in 2019, the 6th international 'Transport & Logistics of South East Europe and Danube Region (TIL 2019)' conference⁵⁵ and a dedicated workshop on Regional Railway Connectivity⁵⁶. For a better coordination in terms of developing efficient multimodal terminals at river ports and to foster the

⁴⁷ Further information: <https://www.unece.org/info/ece-homepage.html>.

⁴⁸ Further information: <https://eurorap.org/>.

⁴⁹ Further information: <https://www.transport-community.org/>.

⁵⁰ Further information: <https://www.eib.org/en/index.htm>.

⁵¹ Further information: <https://www.cei.int/>.

⁵² Further information: <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/about-eusair/pillars/yellow-pillar/>.

⁵³ Further information: <https://www.alpine-region.eu/action-group-4>.

⁵⁴ Further information: <https://www.balticsea-region-strategy.eu/connect-the-region/pa-transport>.

⁵⁵ Further information: <https://transport.danube-region.eu/conferences/transport-and-logistics-in-the-see-and-the-danube-region-til-2019/>.

⁵⁶ Further information: <https://transport.danube-region.eu/workshops/regional-rail-connectivity/>.

engagement in the development of the port network, an **inter-Pillar joint Working Group meeting** of PA 1b and PA 1a was organised.

Projects – implementation & monitoring

PA 1b with its Steering Group continuously identifies, keeps track of and supports over 150 projects at all implementation stages, which have significant impact (added value) on improved mobility and multimodality for road, rail and air transport modes in the Danube Region. Among the projects considered as of strategic value, six DTP projects were successfully finished in 2019: *eGUTS*, *CITYWALK*, *CHESTNUT*, *LINKING DANUBE*, *TRANSDANUBE.PEARLS* and *TRANSGREEN*⁵⁷. *TRANSGREEN* project resulted, among others, in producing the ‘Wildlife and Traffic in the Carpathians - Guidelines how to minimise impact of transport infrastructure development on nature in the Carpathian countries’⁵⁸, contributing to the development of the Strategic Action Plan for the Implementation of the Protocol on Sustainable Transport to the Carpathian Convention, as well as adopting a Declaration ‘Pathways to Greener Transport Infrastructure’⁵⁹ under the aegis of the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the Presidency of the EUSDR. PA 1b also continued the focus initiated in 2017 on 23 key projects that are either already underway or in the pre-construction phase. The projects are divided into nine functional regions (FR)⁶⁰.

In addition work started on the PA 1b long project database of more than 160 projects. This list of planned projects, projects under preparation and ongoing projects was already set in 2012 and was last updated in 2018. It has been temporarily withdrawn from PA1b website in order to be checked and updated. The revision of the long list of projects is going to be completed in 2021 and will be again made available on the PA 1b website (<https://transport.danube-region.eu/>).



PA 2: Sustainable Energy

Cooperation & policy embedding

In line with the Roadmap for the period 2017-2019, PA 2 put further strong emphasis on the cooperation with other macro-regional strategies, initiatives and institutions and also on the update of an extensive stakeholder database. To this end, several joint events and workshops were held and experts invited to events to organise the set-up of an **international network in the energy sector**, with the assistance of the Steering Group members. In order to exploit synergies and thematic alignment with stakeholders of other MRS, PA 2 specifically organised a meeting on energy together with **Interact and other MRS**⁶¹ to kick-off the exchange of experience and mutual learning across the MRS on cross-cutting energy related issues, which was followed by a report on MRS energy priorities published by Interact⁶². Building upon the signed Memorandum of Understanding in 2017, the study ‘Protection of birds from high-voltage power lines with a focus on the countries of the Danube/Carpathian region’⁶³,

⁵⁷ Further information: <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects>

⁵⁸ http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/35/02caafe3c1c1365f76574e754ddbdc4e1af4a7a.pdf

⁵⁹ http://www.interreg-danube.eu/uploads/media/approved_project_output/0001/35/624581a352bdd8e0309c8ac8827a4eb970a59764.pdf

⁶⁰ Further information: <https://transport.danube-region.eu/projects/>

⁶¹ Further information: <https://energy.danube-region.eu/energy-priorities-potentials-for-cross-macro-regional-collaboration/>

⁶² Further information: <http://www.interact-eu.net/library#2557-report-energy-priorities-potentials-cross-macro-regional-collaboration>

⁶³ Further information: https://energy.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/6/2019/09/Study_Birds_FIN.pdf

a corresponding policy paper⁶⁴ and a seminar on the protection of birds from high-voltage power lines in the Danube Region⁶⁵ were elaborated and carried out together with the **Carpathian Convention**, highlighting also cross-cutting topics related to PA 2.

Highlights

In accordance with the policy objectives achieved, in 2019 PA 2 put a key focus on the emerging topics of **sustainable underground energy storage innovations** and **energy poverty in the Danube Region**. In the latter thematic field, PA 2 issued a comprehensive **study**⁶⁶ in the field of energy poverty together with the Czech Technical University, which was accompanied by a **policy paper**⁶⁷ and subsequently organised a **thematic seminar**⁶⁸ to further encourage and explore more suitable solutions in the field of energy poverty. As regards sustainable underground energy storage innovations, PA 2 prepared and published together with the Hungarian Gas Storage a **study**⁶⁹ in this thematic field focusing on the EU goals of the Paris Climate Agreement. In connection with the study, PA 2 organised its 6th **stakeholder seminar** on 'Underground energy storage in the Danube Region – possibilities and European perspective'⁷⁰, demonstrating a great interest, as the share of renewable energy sources is increasing in the Danube Region in line with the EU and national climate and energy targets. During the period Priority Area 2 was also promoting sustainable energy management and energy efficiency in the region while strengthening cooperation with relevant macro-regional initiatives and other relevant actors. In order to promote the communication capacity in this sense, PA2 commissioned a **feasibility study**, aiming to analyse the available information and define and design possible solutions for a relaunched interactive PA2 website.

Projects – implementation & monitoring

In 2019, PA 2 successfully completed its participation as project partner in the *DARLINGe*⁷¹ project. The results of this project with strategic relevance for the EUSDR serve as a basis for future geothermal projects in the Danube Region, under which the elaboration of a geothermal database is planned. The successful submission and implementation of EUSDR projects (with PA 2 as Associated Strategic Partner) continued in 2019, with two projects in the energy sector being submitted to the third DTP call in a two-stage procedure. On this occasion, the project *DanuP-2-Gas* reached the second stage of the call and will kick off in 2020⁷². In addition to that, PA 2 followed closely the implementation of other projects of strategic relevance under the DTP such as *3Smart*⁷³ and *EnergyBarge*⁷⁴, which were also successfully completed in 2019.

⁶⁴ Further information: https://energy.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/6/2019/09/Policy_Paper_Protecting_Birds_from_Powerlines.pdf.

⁶⁵ Further information: <https://energy.danube-region.eu/workshop-on-minimising-the-negative-impacts-of-power-lines-on-birds/>.

⁶⁶ Further information: https://energy.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/6/2020/02/Studie_Energy_Poverty_in_the_Danube_Region.pdf.

⁶⁷ Further information: https://energy.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/6/2020/02/Policy_Paper_Energy_Poverty_in_the_Danube_Region.pdf.

⁶⁸ Further information: <https://energy.danube-region.eu/energy-poverty-seminar/>.

⁶⁹ Further information: <https://energy.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/6/2020/08/Sustainable-Energy-Storage-Innovations.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Further information: <https://energy.danube-region.eu/6th-stakeholder-seminar-of-the-sustainable-energy-priority-area-of-the-eu-strategy-for-the-danube-region-underground-energy-storage-in-the-danube-region-possibilities-and-european-p/>.

⁷¹ Further information: <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/darlinge>.

⁷² Further information: <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/danup-2-gas>.

⁷³ Further information: <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/3smart>.

⁷⁴ Further information: <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/energy-barge>.



PA 3: Culture & Tourism

Cooperation & policy embedding

With regard to policy development, PA 3 continues to pursue the objective of further integrating the Danube Region Strategy and its objectives into national political frameworks, such as national development programs and strategies, as well as into programs for territorial cross-border cooperation. It is expected that cooperation in the multilevel environment will have a concrete **impact on national policies** for example through a public debate on the new targets in the Revised Action Plan in November 2019. PA 3 was able to initiate the international exchange with the **Carpathian Convention** and the **International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR)** in 2019 and is in regular contact with representatives of local and regional authorities, NGOs, academia and civil society through active participation in relevant meetings, workshops and conferences.

Highlights

Significant efforts were undertaken in organising and implementing an internationally perceived and highly attended **conference** on the creation of new Cultural Routes in the Danube Region⁷⁵. In addition to that, **two studies** on festivals in the context of Danube Region tourism⁷⁶ and on the development of cruise tourism in the Danube Region⁷⁷ were successfully commissioned in 2019, in which special attention was paid to the achievement of the objectives of the revised EUSDR Action Plan. The study on festivals and the conference on the creation of new Cultural Routes support the development and promotion of local culture, including events, festivals and heritage sites concerned in joint routes and initiatives. The study on cruise tourism provides detailed, reliable and up-to-date information and expresses the opportunity for the further development of waterways, which in the future will be expressed in an intensified **inter-PA cooperation** with PA 1a. Furthermore, PA 3 was able to initiate a closer **inter-Pillar cooperation** with PA 10 by participating in the Steering Group meeting.

Projects – implementation & monitoring

Nine transnational projects running under the DTP with strategic relevance for EUSDR PA 3 were successfully completed in 2019⁷⁸. Among these projects, the project *CultPlatForm_21* – labelled as a relevant project for the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 by the European Commission – was highlighted by PA 3 in its special week's story⁷⁹.

In addition PA3 supports the Routes4U project and cooperates with the Council of Europe on cultural routes⁸⁰. One of the objectives of the Routes4U Project is the assistance to cultural routes projects in view of the certification "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" or to certified Cultural Routes for their extension, according to the priorities identified in the EU macro-regions. In this respect, PA3 is increasingly working on the defined flagships of the Iron Age Route and the Cyril and Methodius Route.

⁷⁵ Further information: <https://cultureandtourism.danube-region.eu/conference-on-the-creation-of-new-cultural-routes-in-the-danube-region/>.

⁷⁶ Further information: https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Festival-Tourism-in-the-DR_Report_ENG.pdf.

⁷⁷ Further information: https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Cruise-Tourism-in-the-DR_Report_ENG.pdf.

⁷⁸ Further information: <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/relevant-documents/dtp-capitalisation-strategy/thematic-pole-5a-cultural-values>.

⁷⁹ Further information: https://cultureandtourism.danube-region.eu/eusdr-presents-the-project-cultplatform_21/.

⁸⁰ Further information: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes-and-regional-development/flagships-eusdr>.

3.2. Pillar 2 “Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region”

The Danube basin is characterised by complex and fragile ecosystems and habitats underpinning all human activities. Against the backdrop of climate change, sustainable use of natural resources and the overall preservation of the quality of environment in the Danube Region were identified as main challenges. The Danube Region Strategy proposes specific cooperation activities for restoring and maintaining water quality, managing environmental risks and preserving biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soil. In 2019 stakeholders across the Danube Region developed joint measures to protect and restore the quality of often invaluable natural assets, together forming a variety of interrelated and interdependent ecosystems. At the same time integrated activities were designed in order to prevent, prepare for and respond to natural and man-made disasters.



PA 4: Water Quality

Cooperation & Policy Embedding

In order to restore and maintain the quality of waters in the Danube Region PA 4 ensured continuous **exchange** and developed **coordinated actions** with European and international organisations, such as International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC), International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), Global Water Partnership (GWP), and Carpathian Convention. In February 2019, PA 4 and GWP CEE signed a **Memorandum of Cooperation** in order to share visions and create win-win solutions in the areas which are mutually relevant for both entities. In September 2019, the **Updated Integrated Tisza River Basin Management Plan** was endorsed by Ministers and high representatives of the Tisza countries⁸¹. Also, a new **Memorandum of Understanding** related to the further cooperation was signed.

Additionally, trilateral meetings of ICPDR, EUSDR PA 4 and the Sava Commission facilitated harmonisation of tasks among these organisations.

During 2019, cooperation with EUSDR PA 5, PA 6 and PA 1a was further strengthened.

PA 4 continued the collaboration on water related topics with the representatives of the other MRS. Thus, the second workshop on **“Building common cross-macro regional strategies collaboration platform on water topics”** focused on identifying and coordinating themes and topics which could be jointly addressed in the future. Furthermore, during the event **“Pharmaceuticals in the Environment - Policy Round Table”**⁸², organised in December 2019 in Lund (SE), PA 4 representatives shared their findings on pharmaceuticals in water and learned about best practices in waste water treatment in EUSBSR, thus enhancing cross-MRS **cooperation at technical level** and laying the grounds for further developments at policy and decision-making level.

Highlights

⁸¹ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/tisza-ministerial-meeting/>

⁸² <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/policy-round-table-pharmaceuticals-in-the-environment/>

The study “**Occurrence of Pharmaceuticals in the Waters of the Danube Region**”⁸³ was published in 2019. It improves the knowledge base related to the occurrence of the most widespread drugs, pharmaceuticals and their metabolites in the Danube River Basin and presents information on their impact on the environment, on their monitoring in waste water, sludge, surface water as well as the legislative background.

In order to improve the dialogue and cooperation between agriculture and environment sectors, an **international event focused on reducing agricultural pollution**⁸⁴ was jointly organised by ICPDR, PA 4, the Hungarian Ministry of Interior and the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture. On this occasion, the **Guidance Document on Sustainable Agriculture in the Danube River Basin**, elaborated by ICPDR, was introduced. It tackles the problem of decoupling pollution from agricultural growth and will be permanently updated according to the Common Agricultural Policy.

Moreover, a special **brochure on water success stories**⁸⁵ was compiled by PA 4 and PA 5 with the purpose of collecting and disseminating information about the results achieved in the Danube Region. The **brochure “Plastic Pollution of Rivers in the Danube River – best practices towards reduction of plastic pollution”**⁸⁶, introduces best practices showcasing the steps to be taken in order to overcome this emerging problem. Furthermore, it presents policies, facts and figures related to plastic pollution of rivers in the Danube Region and highlights the role of international cooperation in reducing the plastic waste in the Danube Catchment area.

In addition remarkable steps in the establishment and completion of SavaGIS were undertaken.

PA 4 participated in **thematic events** organised by ICPDR and the Carpathian Convention and in awareness raising events, such as the PLASTIC CUP⁸⁷. The visibility of the PA was further enhanced through the organisation with the support of EUSDR HU NC of an **ICPDR – EUSDR side event to the Budapest Water Summit**⁸⁸ 2019, the largest diplomatic event of Hungary in 2019.

Projects – Implementation & Monitoring

In order to support the development of **new projects**, PA 4 regularly informed its Steering Group members and updated the PA 4 website on open calls from various EU financial mechanisms. Moreover, start-up financial possibilities were highlighted. In 2019 PA 4 supported five **projects set-ups** with a Letter of Recommendation: *OPTAIN*, *AquaPinka*, *Tid(y)Up*, *Danube Hazard m3c* and *LAREDAR*.

In synergy with ICPDR, PA 4 promoted the **implementation of WE PASS**⁸⁹, an EU-funded project aiming to facilitate fish migration. Furthermore, PA 4 took part in *WE PASS* events. Also, PA4 supported the Danube Sturgeon Task Force in developing its activities.

During 2019 the implementation of flagship projects **DanubeSediment** and **JOINTISZA** were successfully closed.

⁸³ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/occurrence-of-pharmaceuticals-in-the-waters-of-the-danube-region-study/>

⁸⁴ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/the-first-international-workshop-on-water-and-agriculture-in-the-danube-river-basin-is-taking-place-on-6-7-november-2019-in-budapest-hungary/>

⁸⁵ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/the-brochure-on-water-success-stories-2017-2019-eu-strategy-for-the-danube-region-priority-areas-45-was-completed-the-brochure-contains-the-results-of-16-projects-relevant-for-the/>

⁸⁶ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/eusdr-pa4-brochure-on-plastic-pollution-of-rivers-in-the-danube-region/>

⁸⁷ <https://petkupa.hu/eng/> and <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/news-and-events/project-news/2631>

⁸⁸ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/the-budapest-water-summit-2019-bws-2019/>

⁸⁹ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/we-pass-project-1st-stakeholder-workshop/>

Besides the flagship projects, PA4 took a leading role in capitalisation of other water quality related projects of the Danube Transnational Programme like *Dri-Danube*, *CAMARO-D*, *SIMONA*, *Danube Floodplain*, *MEASURES*⁹⁰.



PA 5: Environmental Risks

Cooperation & Policy Embedding

PA5 cooperated with Global Water Partnership Central and Eastern Europe (GWP CEE) in order to finalise the **EU Drought Policy Review**, a document which provides countries with background information for the integration of drought management into the most relevant existing policies and supports the development of a separate (new) drought policy with reference to existing legal frameworks. In this respect, the contribution by PA 5 covered areas such as: Nature Biodiversity, Industry, Transport and Hydropower.

Also, strategic networking and cooperation with EUSDR PA4, ICPDR and GWP CEE and structures from the other MRS was enhanced.

Highlights

In order to extend the cooperation of the Danube Region countries on developing standards for environmental risks management and recommendations for the involvement of civil protection organisations and fire and rescue services, PA 5 initiated the process of **establishing the PA5 Disaster Management Working Group (DMWG)** under the leadership of the Budapest Fire Fighter Association. Also, PA5 supported the **elaboration of e-learning material** on how to increase public awareness of the importance of proper flood protection⁹¹. PA 5 further co-organised relevant events, such as a large-scale **flood protection training and response exercise** (Danube Region Exercise - DAREX)⁹² and an **International Operative Flood Risk Management Plan workshop**⁹³, which benefited from the participation of experts from 6 EUSDR counties (DE, HR, HU, RO, RS, SI).

At the same time PA 5 provided **support to the ICPDR for updating the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan**, primarily through active participation in the meetings of the ICPDR Flood Protection Expert Group.

Also, PA 5 supported the development of the **inventory of the Accidental Hazard Spots (AHS)** by participating as permanent observer in the events of the ICPDR Accident Prevention and Control Expert Group (APC EG). In this respect, consistent progress has been reported, as nine EUSDR countries (BG, SK, BA, HU, HR, SI, AT, RO and CZ) managed to fully update their national inventory by the end of 2019. The visibility of this Priority Area was increased due to the **participation of the Coordinators in different events** (Tisza Ministerial Meeting, ICPDR 22th Ordinary meeting, Celebrating 25 years of successful transboundary cooperation – side event of Budapest Water Summit, “Finding synergies and addressing challenges” - Workshop on hydro-morphological measures under the Floods and Water Framework Directives) and due to the **continuous publication of articles on the PA 5 website** and the dissemination of brochures. For example, the **brochure “Success Stories 2017-2019 - EU Strategy for**

⁹⁰ Further information on each project is available here: <http://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects>

⁹¹ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/elearning/index.html>

⁹² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pprXM_yonpl&feature=youtu.be

⁹³ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/sites/7/2020/04/Study-on-operative-flood-management-plus.pdf>

the **Danube Region Priority Areas 4 & 5**⁹⁴ was published in November 2019, facilitating communication on the improvement of waters and the fight against environmental risks along the Danube River. The **brochure “Managing Environmental Risks in the Danube Region”**⁹⁵ comprises relevant information on PA 5 activities, projects and results.

Projects – Implementation & Monitoring

EUSDR PA 5 issued all together seven **Letters of Recommendation** for projects submitted under calls opened by INTERREG DTP, DG ECHO Exercise Call, Horizon 2020 Programme, International Visegrad Fund and INTERREG Slovakia-Hungarian CBC. At the same time PA 5 supported the project promoters in the elaboration phase of the projects as well as in their implementation. The proposals covered a broad scale of PA5 actions, including flood risk management, climate change and disaster management related issues. In this respect, PA 5 HU participated in eleven **project meetings** (*DAREFFORT, PROLINE – CE, RAINMAN, DriDanube, Danube Sediment, DAREnet, JOINTISZA*). Other relevant projects for PA 5 are: *CAMARO-D* (developing comprehensive recommendations for the implementation of a transnational Land Use Development Plan), *RaabFlood4Cast* (sharing dynamic information to support flood and disaster prevention in Raab River), *PLATFORM* (implementing strategic flood risk management), and *SAFETISZA* (reconstruction of strategic water management infrastructure), *FloodUZH* (decreasing the negative flood impact and improving ecological situation in the Uzh River basin).



PA 6: Biodiversity & Landscapes, Quality of Air & Soils

Cooperation & Policy Embedding

Throughout the entire reporting period, PA 6 developed activities which contributed to the preservation of biodiversity and landscapes and to the improvement of quality of air and soil in the Danube Region in line with the actions included in the EUSDR Action Plan. For example, the **Galați Declaration**⁹⁶, adopted by the participants in the conference "Conservation of Danube Sturgeons - a challenge or a burden" held in October 2019 in Galati (RO) represents a strong contribution to policy development as regards sturgeon conservation and protection in the Danube Region.

For fostering synergies across MRS, PA 6 with the support of INTERACT organised the **“Cross macro-regional meeting on biodiversity with a special focus on ecological connectivity”**. On this occasion, representatives of all 4 MRS together with representatives of the Alpine and Carpathian Conventions confirmed potential cross- MRS thematic collaboration topics such as: nature protection, green infrastructure, developing green and blue corridors, climate change and adaptation, green urban spaces, nature based solutions, integrated coastal zone management.

Highlights

⁹⁴ https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/sites/7/2020/10/Success_Stories_2017-2019_vegleges.pdf

⁹⁵ https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/sites/7/2019/11/PA5_Environmental_Risks_Danube_Region_Strategy.pdf

⁹⁶ http://www.sturgeon.ugal.ro/images/2019/Galati_Declaration.pdf

In 2019, a **study on exploiting funding opportunities**⁹⁷ was finalised. It includes an analysis of gaps, challenges, opportunities and recommendations regarding funding opportunities for PA 6 and provides detailed knowledge on all possible financing sources in order to support the elaboration of future projects relevant for the PA. Furthermore, both Priority Area Coordinators were involved in national discussions on the next funding period 2021-2027 and specifically on the next Danube Transnational Programme.

Another **study** focuses on “**Opportunities and proposal for a revised roadmap**”⁹⁸. It offers a comprehensive overview of the EUSDR Action Plan approved in 2010, analyses the results and challenges in its implementation, presents the new processes enforced through EUSDR and proposals for the Action Plan revision as regards PA 6 as well as for the roadmap revision. Additionally, it comprises a revised reporting structure for the Task Forces which aims to further stabilise communication and information flow between PA 6 its main actors.

Moreover, in 2019 the implementation of the **Masterplan Living Space Bavarian Danube** became a best practice example for cross-cutting- and multi-level governance of PA 6. The activities were jointly developed by approx. 50 representative stakeholders from NGOs (Nature Protection), farmers associations and public administration from the local and regional level in Bavaria (DE) within the Task Force Masterplan.

Furthermore, the governance structures of PA 6 were re-enforced by **setting up Rules of Procedure and electing a governance board for the Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF)**, thus considerably raising performance and professional implementation.

At national level, PA 6 responsible authorities influenced the establishment of a **permanent closed season (fishing ban) for sterlet** in the fishing waters of the Republic of Serbia. In their capacity as PA 6 SG members, representatives of the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture hosted and co-organised in cooperation with ICPDR and PA 4 the “**Workshop on Water and Agriculture in the Danube River Basin**” (November, 2019, Budapest). At this occasion, the ICPDR Guidance Document on Sustainable Agriculture in the Danube River Basin was introduced and discussed.

Projects – Implementation & Monitoring

The project *MEASURES*, financed by DTP aims to create ecological corridors by identifying key habitats and initiating protection measures along the Danube and its main tributaries. *ConnectGREEN* project has the goal to maintain and improve the ecological connectivity between natural habitats, especially between Natura 2000 sites and other protected areas of transnational relevance in the Carpathian ecoregion. Other representative projects, as already reported for the period 2016-2018 and as carried on throughout 2019, include: *DANUBE parksCONNECTED*, *D2C DaRe to Connect* and *LENA*.

⁹⁷ <https://nature.danube-region.eu/developing-study-exploiting-funding-opportunities/>

⁹⁸ <https://nature.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/sites/9/2019/12/%E2%80%9COpportunities-and-proposals-for-a-revised-roadmap%E2%80%9D.pdf>

3.3. Pillar 3 “Building Prosperity in the Danube Region”

The Danube Region is often referred to as the most heterogeneous European macro-region. Its countries experience significant differences as regards innovation, competitiveness, education, the labour market and marginalised communities. Therefore, the thematic areas dedicated to building prosperity in the Danube Region aim at improving cooperation across the region by jointly developing projects for the improvement of social and economic framework conditions, such as stimulating excellence in research and development, strengthening cooperation between knowledge providers, boosting transnational cooperation between innovation and business and improving business support.



PA 7: Knowledge Society

Cooperation & Policy Embedding

In 2019, the Coordinators of PA 7 focused on developing activities which lead towards the achievement of common EUSDR objectives and targets in the field of higher education, research and ICT. In this respect, PA 7 carried on its **cooperation** with the Joint Research Center (JRC) on Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3) and with Danube Rectors Conference (DRC), Central European Exchange Programme for University Studies (CEEPUS), Erasmus+, Slovak Academic Information Agency (SAIA) and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) on enhancing co-publications, mobilities and overall cooperation (based on the quintuple innovation helix framework) in the region.

In order to identify options for building closer working relationships between policy makers and innovator actors, PA7 team participated in **the meeting of macro-regional coordinators in charge of innovation** from all 4 MRS.

Highlights

PA 7, supported by the Joint Research Centre, was strongly involved in activities related to the development of **Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3)** in the Danube Region countries. In 2019, significant progress was made, as following: the Smart Specialisation Strategy of the Republic of Serbia was finalised and sent to the Government for adoption, Montenegro adopted its Smart Specialisation Strategy, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova were in the phase of Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP), while North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina initiated the elaboration process of their Smart Specialisation Strategies. Furthermore, in the Republic of Moldova, the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment (MoARDE) and the Moldavian Regional Development Agencies organised awareness raising events on Smart Specialisation.

Moreover, PA 7 published the study **“Governance, financing, monitoring and evaluation of Smart Specialisation – Analysis and guidelines from EU Danube Region countries”** which aims at providing guidance for non-EU countries of the Danube Region by building on examples and practical details from Slovenia, the South Moravian region (Czech Republic) and Lower Austria (Republic of Austria).

Also, PA 7 prepared the study **“Evaluation of the knowledge society in the Danube Region (2010 – 2018)”** which assessed the current state and progress in the area of knowledge society in the Danube Region countries and provided recommendations for improving the conditions for a successful

knowledge society in the region. It encompassed chapters on the fulfilment of objectives from 2016 and on evaluation of best practice to date, including a SWOT analysis.

The **Danube Funding Cooperation Network (DFCN)** continued to coordinate and synchronise national, bilateral and regional cooperation in research and innovation in the Danube Region on all levels. As a result, the **2nd Call for applications** was launched in July 2019 - the call was announced under the headline of Multilateral Scientific and Technological Cooperation Projects in the Danube Region. Five countries (Austria, Czech Republic, France, Serbia, and Slovakia) joined forces to support the mobility of researchers among the participating countries to carry out joint research projects and 20 out of 72 submitted projects were selected for financing in 2020-2021.

Intensive efforts have been done for **enhancing the visibility of PA 7** by disseminating information via PA7 official webpage and social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram).

Projects – Implementation & Monitoring

PA7 supported **cross-fertilisation events** and was involved in the activities developed with four Thematic Poles of the DTP **Capitalisation** Strategy (TP1, TP2, TP3 and TP9). The Coordinators of PA 7 attended several capitalisation events, connected to DTP projects in their final phase (*Excellence in RESTI*, *Made in Danube*, *Resinfra@DR*, *EDULAB*), thus supporting the networking and involvement of PA 7 stakeholders. Projects dealing with the topic of social innovation, such as *INT-VET: National Centres for Apprenticeship (ERASMUS+)* and *Danube:Future - achieving integrated sustainable development in the Danube River Basin* are highly relevant for PA 7 as a challenge for the interdisciplinary humanities. Other continuing project examples are *InnoSchool*, *InDeed*, *Danube Chance 2.0*, as already outlined in the previous Implementation Report 2016-2018.



PA 8: Competitiveness of Enterprises

Cooperation & Policy Embedding

Priority Area 8 initiated processes in order to influence national policy decision makers in five thematic areas: innovation and technology transfer, clusters, digitalisation, artificial intelligence and female entrepreneurship, but also in other relevant areas such as bio-economy.

Also, PA 8 strongly cooperated with PA 7 and PA 9 in order to identify relevant crosscutting topics.

Highlights

In order to strengthen transnational cooperation and boost the process of harmonisation of national policies within the region, PA 8 produced two **studies**: The “**White Paper on Strengthening the Capacities of Clusters**” presents ideas for further strengthening the capacity of cluster initiatives in the Danube Region and linking the cluster-approach with Smart Specialisation and the macro-regional approach in the future. Also, PA 8 produced the study “**Policy Recommendation for Streamlined Funding**” which comprises a description of the status quo of embedding of EUSDR into mainstream programmes as well as a summary of policy recommendations for Managing Authorities.

To foster networking, PA 8 organised/co-organised a **series of workshops and conferences** aiming to take on board different stakeholders, from national decision makers and politicians to SMEs and intermediate bodies. In this respect, “**Danube Competitiveness in Practice**” events represent a relevant example, e.g. the conference “**Sustainable Transformation of the Danube Region and the Future of the bio-economy-based Competitiveness**” organised jointly by the DTP project DanuBioValNet and PA 8 in Prague (CZ). The event “**Danube Competitiveness in Practice feat. Smart Cities – innovative digital business perspectives for SMEs**” presented business models aiming at transforming degraded urban areas into intelligent centre pieces of smart cities. The Danube Competitiveness in Practice event “**Circular Economy in Plastic Industry**” focused on presenting SMEs with changes in the legislation on plastics and circular economy.

Moreover, **joint events of PA 8 with relevant projects** were organised:

- the Joint Event of the Project UpGradeSME and the Priority Area 8,
- the Artificial Intelligence and Automotive Industry conference, organised by the Pannon Business Network Association (PBN) and PA 8’s Working Group Artificial Intelligence in the framework of the Automotive Hungary exhibition,
- the capitalisation event “Fostering female Entrepreneurship in the Danube Region”.

Two events under the motto “Transnational Bio-economy Partnerships: Meet & Match on the go!” took place in Stuttgart (DE).

In 2019, the network of **Danube Transfer Centers** reached a number of 14 members from RO, SK, RS, SL, HU, BG, HR and UA which cooperate across various European projects.

At **governance level**, the activity of the 5 Working Groups established under PA 8 created new networks and generated new processes, also influencing the harmonisation of policy making processes within the Danube Region. For example, the **Artificial Intelligence Working Group**, established in 2019 under the leadership of the Pannon Business Network Association (Hungary) prepared a comprehensive policy paper on future development areas of the AI.

Projects – Implementation & Monitoring

DanuBioValnet, Made in Danube, Digitrans and Women in Business, all of them financed by the Danube Transnational Programme, as previously reported, continued to be representative examples of PA 8 activities throughout 2019.



PA 9: People & Skills

Cooperation & Policy Embedding

PA9 carried on **constant exchange** with all Danube Region countries regarding national developments in the fields of education and labour market. In particular, PA 9 actively **cooperated with the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)** regarding vocational education and training and work based learning.

As regards the EUSDR Embedding process (see chapter **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**), PA 9 in cooperation with PA 10 organised the 6th **Meeting of the ESF Managing Authorities Network in the Danube Region**⁹⁹. The participants discussed how to integrate transnational cooperation in the MFF 2021-2027 and developed a draft text to be used for the new Operational Programmes and for transnational cooperation related to the EUSDR. Furthermore, a Vision Paper was developed and accorded as basis for further steps towards better coordination of thematic priorities, project proposals and capacities for the technical implementation of transnational cooperation in accordance with the requirements of managing authorities and the EUSDR.

Highlights

The report '**Danube Region Monitor - People & Skills**'¹⁰⁰, published in 2019, is a tool for evidence-based decision-making in EUSDR activities. It was elaborated and tested through participatory work along the previous 3 years and presents the current developments as per 2019 in labour market and education systems based on quantitative data.

One of the most notable PA 9 events of 2019 was the Stakeholder Conference "**Building Partnerships for Future Skills**" (Chisinau, October 2019). The event focused on several topics, such as innovative approaches in education, the role of the Qualification Frameworks and the importance of the development of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in the Danube Region.

To foster transnational cooperation among schools and teachers in the Danube Region, PA 9 co-organised the **thematic eTwinning Conference** "Learning, teaching, exchanging – school cooperations in the Danube Region".

In addition PA 9 assembled experts on skills development from different sectors - educational institutions, public administration, research, NGOs, employers - in the Danube Region during a 2-days workshop in Chisinau, Moldova. The aim of this workshop was to exchange expertise on current developments and challenges concerning skills mismatch, its measurement and different approaches to this issue.

⁹⁹ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/esf/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/danube-region-monitor-people-skills/>

As part of its communication activities, PA9 published a **folder**¹⁰¹, with updated information on PA 9 objectives and actions.

PA 9 coordinators functioned as Co-Leaders of Thematic Pole 10 "Migration" and Thematic Pole 9 "Educational Governance" within the DTP Capitalisation Strategy, thus contributing to enhancement of the cooperation between pole members and ensuring knowledge transfer within the pole and to a broader group of stakeholders and expert communities.

Projects – Implementation & Monitoring

In 2019 PA 9 encouraged and supported the development and the implementation of different types of projects funded from different sources (DTP, DSPF, Interreg V-A, Erasmus+ etc.).

Representative projects for PA 9 are: *danube@work*, *Danube Chance 2.0* (DTP), *Finance 4 positive Social Change* (DTP), *CODES - Competence-Oriented Education for Elementary Schooling in cross-border Regions* (Interreg V-A 2014-2020) and *InnoSchool*. Another example is the project “*Effective Quality Assurance at VET Schools through Successful Change Management - Strengthening the Competences of School Leaders*” (led by OeAD-GmbH using Austrian national funds) which aims at increasing the leadership and Change Management competences of trainers in Serbia and Montenegro. Other projects finalised in 2019 strengthened the socio-entrepreneurial landscape in the Danube Region (e.g. project *SENSES*, led by the IFKA Public Benefit Nonprofit Ltd. (HU)), or fostered cross-border employment and labour mobility through establishing a one-stop-shop with information and services (project *VISA*, CBC RO-BG). Also, PA 9 activities within Thematic Poles 9 and 10 of the DTP Capitalisation Strategy contributed to improving the communication flow among thematically connected projects.

¹⁰¹ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/now-published-new-eusdr-priority-area-9-folder/>

3.4. Pillar 4 “Strengthening the Danube Region”

Danube Region countries share the goal of improving the functioning of democratic institutions, public administrations and central, regional and local organisations to provide a safer and more secure environment for their citizens. To reach this goal, joint actions focus on improving political, civil and administrative structures, multi-level governance mechanisms, facilitating administrative cooperation of cross-border communities as well as on fighting against corruption and organised crime.



PA 10: Institutional Capacity & Cooperation

Cooperation & policy embedding

EUSDR PA 10 continued to foster close **policy cooperation with and involvement of the civil society**, also in a macro-regional context, with the transnational stimulation through Danube Participation Days and National Participation Days¹⁰² or platforms such as the Danube Local Actors Platform¹⁰³ or Participation Partnerships¹⁰⁴. In an effort to give further impetus to the policy development of improved public governance PA 10 drafted two **policy papers on public governance** in close cooperation with experts and practitioners in 2019: The Policy Paper on Sound Public Management¹⁰⁵ provides concepts and recommendations for good governance in the Danube Region and serves as a basis for further initiatives at local level. As regards the Territorial Agenda of the European Union, the Policy Paper on Metropolitan Regions¹⁰⁶ addresses challenges and developments of governance in functional urban areas with a specific view on the Danube Region. With this PA 10 reinforces the spatial dimension of sector policies with a focus on the regional and local level, followed by a process launched to elaborate a subsequent EUSDR PA 10 Policy Paper regarding MLG in functional urban areas.

PA 10 is in regular exchange and cooperation with **networks and institutions**, such as the Working Community of Danube Regions (ARGE Donauländer), EuroCities, the Council of Danube Cities and Regions and the **European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)**. As regards the latter, PA 10 actively contributed to the draft of the EESC Opinion on macro-regional clusters, promoting cooperation between public and private stakeholders at macro-regional level¹⁰⁷. Hence, PA 10 strives for maintaining and consolidating strong linkages with stakeholders on local, regional, national and EU-level.

Highlights

Within the year of 2019 and in line with PA 10 targets and actions, considerable efforts were undertaken to intensify the cooperation between civil society organisations (CSO) and the integration

¹⁰² Further information: <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/participation-day/>.

¹⁰³ Further information: <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/danube-local-actors-platform-d-lap/>.

¹⁰⁴ Further information: <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/participation-partnerships/>.

¹⁰⁵ Further information: https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/sites/3/2020/05/EUSDR-PA10_Sound-Local-Public-Management_Policy-Paper_December-2019.pdf.

¹⁰⁶ Further information: https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/sites/3/2019/12/EUSDR-PA10_Metropolitan_Regions_in_the_Danube_Region_Policy-Paper_December-2019_Version-1.0.docx.

¹⁰⁷ Further information: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/economic-convergence-and-competitiveness-within-macro-regions-transnational-clusters-exploratory-opinion-request>.

of local and regional administration through **continuing annual national EUSDR hearings**, so-called National Participations Days in 11 out of 14 participating EUSDR states. In addition the pilot initiative **Danube Strategic Project Fund** (DSPF, also see EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018, p.37) was successfully finalised, a DSPF Factbook, describing all twelve DSPF projects, was published in April 2019 and interviews with the respective project partners were published on the DSPF blog¹⁰⁸. It supported 12 projects with local actors. Other formats that were successfully continued in 2019 and contributed to an institutionalised exchange between public authorities and civil society organisations, are the **webinar** for funding information in the area of institutional capacity and cooperation¹⁰⁹ and the **Donors' Conference**¹¹⁰. In the course of this framework, further steps were taken to achieve a stronger focus on funding sources provided by foundations or international organisations such as the United Nations. In order to assess the opportunities of transnational cooperation in the European Social Fund (ESF) and to better link project promoters and managing authorities, PA 10 fostered further **cross-Pillar cooperation** with PA 9 by contributing to the network of ESF managing authorities in the Danube Region¹¹¹. In 2019, the network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region discussed in a meeting how to increase transnational cooperation while reducing the administrative burden for project promoters and elaborated on the next steps towards coordination in the Danube Region for the funding period 2021-2027¹¹². In addition the funding database EuroAccess Danube Region could be further implemented in collaboration with EuroVienna and with financial support of DG REGIO. The database provided regular and customised information on current calls.

Another continued main emphasis of PA 10 was on the inclusion of youth policy processes and public governance, embraced within the platform of the **Young Bled Strategic Forum**¹¹³, which brings together young leaders from the entire world to engage in lively discussion and develop out-of-the-box solutions to some of the most pressing world issues.

Projects – implementation & monitoring

Particular emphasis in 2019 was put on the involvement of civil society in EUSDR activities, which has been pursued by PA 10 with a strong involvement of the German state of Baden-Württemberg. In order to mobilise NGOs, citizens and volunteers to contribute to projects and to enhance the engagement with neighbouring countries in the Danube Region, Baden-Württemberg established two funds specifically dedicated to EUSDR in 2012 (see EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018, p. 35), which were continued throughout 2019. The implementation of the following projects linked to and supported by PA 10 *AgriGo4Cities*, *ATTRACTIVE DANUBE*, *CrowdStream* and *Excellence in ReSTI* also continued throughout 2019. In addition PA 10 has contributed to mobilising NGOs, citizens and volunteers to engage in projects such as *Tastes of Danube – Bread Connects*, run by the non-profit organisation Danube-Networkers for Europe (DANET)¹¹⁴. The idea behind the project is to have people experience bread as a form of intangible cultural heritage which they all share and which unites them in their diversity, thus exemplifying how civil society participation in the Danube Region can contribute to overarching EU policy goals.

Additionally, PA 10 disseminated information on current funding and relevant programmes to its stakeholders.

¹⁰⁸ DSPF blog including the DSPF Factbook and interviews: <https://dspf-projects.tumblr.com/>

¹⁰⁹ Further information: <https://danube-region.eu/2019/11/pa10-webinar-on-funding-for-civil-society/>.

¹¹⁰ Further information: <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/donors-conference/>.

¹¹¹ Further information: <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/esf-network-danube-region/>.

¹¹² Further information: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/Minutes-ESF-MA-okt-2019-Sofia.pdf>.

¹¹³ Further information: <https://www.cep.si/bsf/young-bled-strategic-forum-2019/>.

¹¹⁴ Further information: <https://bread-connects.tastes-of-danube.eu/>.



PA 11: Security

Cooperation & policy embedding

In 2019, PA 11 continues to strive to promote **EUSDR policy management exchange and consultations** among their Steering Group, transnational institutions such as the DSP, the ESPON Consortium, WWF Bulgaria and international organisations and law-enforcement agencies such as Europol and the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC). Another essential aspect within PA 11 actions is the long-term cooperation to establish a network of contact and coordination centres along the Danube. This network is continuously growing and was enhanced in 2019 through the repetitive **Joint operation days**, organised by Hungary in October 2019¹¹⁵. These joint actions are important to strengthen the cooperation between the involved authorities and to foster exchange of experience.

Highlights

Special emphasis in the main work in 2019 was put on the **thematic areas** of border police cooperation, mobile organised criminal groups, combatting terrorism, strengthening police cooperation and events on prevention of corruption. Following the specific working areas two practical **workshops** were implemented in 2019 regarding border police cooperation¹¹⁶ and anti-corruption¹¹⁷. In addition an anti-terrorism **seminar** on Jihadist Terrorism was organised.

The horizontal cooperation was further improved in areas of mutual interest and tangible results of the **inter-Pillar cooperation** between PA 11 and PA 1a were achieved in common meetings and in the 2019 revised document 'Practical Manual on border controls along the Danube'¹¹⁸. Further, PA 11 envisages **inter-PA cooperation** with PA 10 in the area of trafficking in human beings via a common event in the upcoming implementation period of the revised EUSDR Action Plan. In the course of these activities, PA 11 is committed to sustainable development in the Danube Region, as security has **inter-sectoral relevance** to many other aspects of the Strategy. It is the framework for safe transport, secure energy corridors, security of tourism and public places, including food security, etc.

Projects – implementation & monitoring

In 2019 PA 11 labelled two projects as of strategic relevance for the EUSDR in the course of their Steering Group meetings: The Czech project *CO3DIL*¹¹⁹ (Collaboration for Dismantling Drugs Distribution and Illicit Laboratories) is funded under the Internal Security Fund and is supported by Europol, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Interpol, SELEC and Frontex. The *EAST* (Effective Enforcement Actions against Sturgeon Trafficking) project is funded under the DTP SMF. PA 11 further supports project *CSDR – Cooperation Southeast – Danube Region* against drug trafficking¹²⁰.

¹¹⁵ Further information: <https://security.danube-region.eu/darif-joint-operation/>.

¹¹⁶ Further information: <https://security.danube-region.eu/symposium-border-management-and-enhancement-of-border-police-cooperation-within-the-framework-of-the-eu-strategy-for-the-danube-region-eusdr-priority-area-11/>.

¹¹⁷ Further information: <https://security.danube-region.eu/conference-on-international-cooperation-in-the-field-of-combating-corruption-in-the-danube-region/>.

¹¹⁸ Further information: https://navigation.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/sites/10/2019/09/20190516_3rd_edition_Manual_on_Border_Controls_compressed.pdf.

¹¹⁹ Further information: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/how-to-participate/org-details/944699394/project/822773/program/31077817/details>.

¹²⁰ Further information: <https://security.danube-region.eu/projects/>.

4. Conclusions and Outlook

In 2019 the major task of revising the EUSDR Action Plan has laid the cornerstone for moving forward with several EUSDR activities and processes: **EUSDR embedding / untapping further funding sources, EUSDR monitoring & evaluation and EUSDR communication**. On top of this, a multitude of possibilities how to **improve and build EUSDR capacities, strengthen the Strategy's policy impact and align the Strategy with national and EU documents and processes** has been identified¹²¹. The following paragraphs briefly summarise the most important aspects in these fields and provide an outlook for the upcoming reporting period 2020-2021.

Further Funding Sources to be untapped

In 2019 a major task within the EUSDR was to start preparations for the upcoming programming period 2021-2027. As chapter **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.** has shown, first steps in this direction were taken in the course of the Action Plan revision as well as by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency by providing the so-called *Discussion Paper Embedding* and proposing the set-up of an Embedding Task Force. Next to the obvious task of ensuring possible synergies with the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme as well as with CBC programmes in both the programming and implementation phase, a far more complex task lies ahead EUSDR core stakeholders: There are a multitude of national Operational Programmes which have already contributed to the implementation of EUSDR priorities and projects, as pointed out in the previous EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 (see pages 34 ff.). However, EUSDR coordination with mainstream programmes such as *Investments in Growth and Jobs* IGJ/ERDF is yet to be formalised, which is also supported by the European Parliament and the Council in the proposal for the Common Provisions Regulation for the upcoming programming period 2021-2027 (COM/2018/375 final). Therefore, first studies in preparation of EUSDR Embedding on the national level were prepared and first meetings among National Coordinators and managing authorities / programming authorities were held on national level.

For the critical phase of EUSDR Embedding in 2020 National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators will be key actors when it comes to identifying strategic topics for embedding and cooperation with managing authorities of the ERDF strand *Investments in Growth and Jobs* (IGJ), the European Social Fund (ESF) and IPA and ENI programming authorities. A more coordinated and integrated use of available funding shall be guaranteed at all levels and ex-post labelling of EUSDR relevant projects under the mainstream programmes shall be avoided. Several Priority Area Coordinators also consider centrally managed programmes such as LIFE, Horizon 2020, Erasmus+ and COSME as important funding source to their activities. In this regard, EUSDR NCs expressed the necessity of active support by the European Commission.

All in all, EUSDR Embedding will mean to clearly communicate to managing and programming authorities the added value of integrating EUSDR actions in their programme documents. The Danube Strategy Point will support this vital task by designing a simplified leaflet summarising and communicating potential contributions of EUSDR activities to the new programmes in 2021-2027 and by assisting the Task Force Embedding. As one National Coordinator summarises the purpose of

¹²¹ Source of conclusions and suggestions for future development: Reporting of EUSDR NCs and PACs to EC for the 3rd report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies

Embedding: “[Let’s] allow the EUSDR to develop better into a tool for the implementation of EU policies”.

NCs and PACs have also been taking their considerations further ahead to the implementing phase 2021-2027. In this respect, the application of 1) MRS specific selection criteria for project proposals in CBC programmes as well as 2) issuing Letters of Recommendation for project proposals on behalf of EUSDR Priority Areas, 3) multilateral calls (e.g. 2nd call for applications for multilateral scientific and technological cooperation in the Danube Region, following the 1st call in 2016) and 4) small-scale project funding facilities with lower formal requirements to support the translation of policies into projects have been identified as good practices which are to be continued in the upcoming programming period 2021-2027. Project proposals supported by EUSDR Priority Areas which are nevertheless declined, could receive extra support in adapting to the requirements of the programmes. In the effort to make better and more effective use of EU funds, it has also been stressed that Priority Area Coordinators should make sure to concentrate resources on selected strategic projects / flagships. This concept will be further explored in preparation of the upcoming programming period. Finally, also in view of a more effective use of EU funds, capitalisation of transnational project results in CBC and mainstream national programmes (and the other way around) is envisaged to be pursued more consistently in the future.

Outreach to stakeholders to be strengthened through effective communication

The Danube Region Strategy faces the challenge of achieving broad recognition among national and local public authorities, civil society organisations, project implementers and sectoral experts relevant to the Strategy. This challenge has to be addressed by investing in communication activities on all levels of the Strategy. NCs and PACs with the support of the Danube Strategy Point laid the foundation for this intensified communication activities by elaborating a draft EUSDR Communication Strategy in 2019. Furthermore, previously existing communication activities via the internet, social media, newsletters and brochures, as well as communication in the framework of meetings and events (see chapter **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**) were continued. As regards participation in meetings and events, the following statement by a National Coordinator can be underlined: “Building of networks of experts, exchanging knowledge and best practices should continue as it proved fruitful for our working field and helps to make a vivid contribution to our targets and actions.” It was also pointed out that communication of EUSDR priorities along with matching national and international funding resources needs to be facilitated at the local level. The understanding of the potential added value of the EUSDR to policies at national and local level needs to be strengthened.

- In this regard, the upcoming Embedding tool, as announced by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency in their *Discussion Paper Embedding*, will certainly be a first useful tool for EUSDR core stakeholders (in this case NCs, PACs and SG members) when communicating with public authorities at national and local levels as well as with managing and programming authorities.
- EUSDR information campaigns, highlighting the Strategy’s added value and concrete achievements, could be organised on the national level. Also, possibilities of incorporating national projects and activities into the EUSDR framework could be considered more strongly.

Further routes for more effective communication are targeted messages *at* and inclusion *of* youth as well as strengthened inclusion of NGOs:

- Including youth more strongly into EUSDR activities could help in making the agenda of the Danube Region Strategy more tangible and visible in all EUSDR participating states. Furthermore, a more inclusive approach towards NGOs could prove to be valuable when it comes to sharing resources, such as for the organisation of events, exchange of expertise in various fields and identification of additional funds for co-financing initiatives. One PA specifically underlined its participation in events organised by civil society for targeted communication.
- The promotion of the EUSDR and MRS in general as a tool to break down European Integration could be strengthened in the European regions and local communities, also in the EU candidate and neighbouring countries.

In the case of Priority Area 3 (Culture & Tourism) a specific challenge has been pointed out, namely low interest of global tour operators for transnational projects and products in the Danube Region.

- Priority Area 3 plans to address this challenge through supporting stronger and more coherent marketing and digital promotion, e.g. by integrating local tourism stakeholders and service providers in the marketing of cultural routes.

Capacity Building to be further strengthened

The reinforcement of shared capacities with the Danube Transnational Programme and its support towards the EUSDR governance through the 2nd PAC call was a milestone in 2019 for EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and the Strategy alike. The approval of the second PAC projects by the DTP means sustained financial resources for the support of EUSDR Steering Groups and for the implementation of the Priority Area's actions. This renewal of DTP PAC projects also gave a well-timed impetus to the **EU candidate and neighbouring countries** (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Moldova and Ukraine) to strengthen their commitment and involvement to the implementation of the Strategy. Representatives of the non-EU countries within the Danube Region Strategy acknowledge that their participation in the Strategy is very helpful in getting accustomed to processes and communication within the European Union. At the same time they express their need to strengthen capacities regarding internal coordination, handling administrative tasks and decision making processes. When it comes to project participation and implementation by non-EU countries, it has been pointed out on the part of both NCs and PACs that there is still work to be done.

- The set-up of controlling systems for EU funds is still to be finalised in some cases, such as Ukraine.
- Regarding support for internal coordination, handling administrative tasks and decision making processes, the possibility of setting up mentorship activities among EU and non-EU countries within the EUSDR or on the part of the Danube Strategy Point has been pointed out.
- As for project financing, further reinforced use of the Western Balkans Investment Framework could foster better regional integration of non-EU participating states in the Danube Region Strategy, especially under the Pillar "Connectivity". On the political level, the Croatian EUSDR Presidency has taken up the task of intensifying cooperation with the Western Balkan countries in its programme, which is a vital contribution to capacity building with EU candidate countries.
- One of the EU candidate countries further expressed its wish for more funding dedicated to IPA and ENI within the transnational programmes.

An administrative contribution to strengthening EUSDR internal capacities in 2019 was the definition of Rules of Procedure for communication and organisation among Priority Area Coordinators. However, when it comes to thematic coordination among Priority Areas, National Coordinators and

Priority Area Coordinators alike continue to perceive the need for intensified cross-PA collaboration in some cases: “Several pressing challenges the Danube Region faces, are of a cross-cutting nature and cannot be clearly allocated to a single PA alone.”

- In this respect the revised EUSDR Action Plan provides guidance with its three **horizontal frames**, relevant for all EUSDR Priority Areas: 1) digitalisation, 2) migration and demographic change and 3) climate change, also see chapter **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden..**
- Also, chapter 6.3 of the Consolidated Input of the Danube Region Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan¹²² specifies cross-cutting issues to be addressed.
- These cross-cutting issues should be strengthened both on policy and project level and their coordination among Priority Areas could be supported by the Danube Strategy Point.
- A more coordinated approach across Priority Areas might also support a more effective use of available funds, which is why it should be considered in the EUSDR Embedding process for the programming period 2021-2027.
- In addition to the DSP as support structure of the Strategy, it has been pointed out that technical experts for coordination, complementary thematic specialisation and exchange of knowledge and methodologies might be beneficial for the implementation of the Strategy. Potential facilitators in this regard could come from the European Commission or the Interact programme.
- A better understanding of how political agenda setting and policy cycles work could be part of further capacity building on Priority Area level. Furthermore, it has been pointed out among PACs that training and technical support are needed for project development, media relations, communication with project promoters, managing authorities and with civil society (see “Outreach to stakeholders to be strengthened through effective communication” below).

As for **capacities on the national level**, this report clearly shows how almost all EUSDR participating states either have solid coordination mechanisms in place or have taken the necessary steps to establish national coordination platforms and mechanisms within the reporting period, also see chapter **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden..** An issue which seems to persist, though, is the low **attendance of and participation in Steering Groups** on behalf of certain participating states, depending on the Priority Area – this was also one of the results of the EUSDR Operational Evaluation (see chapter 2.3). While National Coordinators acknowledge the necessity to ensure continuity and stability of national structures for the implementation of macro-regional strategies, there is a multitude of reasons for this persisting issue of low attendance and low participation in Steering Groups: too general topics discussed, topics found not to be relevant for implementation of the Strategy in the respective country, incapability with other work obligations which are often seen as more important, frequent staff changes in the line ministries and therefore lack of institutional knowledge and memory and also weak mandates in Steering Groups. All this can result in a lack of quota for decision-making and in holding-up the implementation of the Strategy.

- As already pointed out in the EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018, administrative conditions on national level can hardly be influenced by National Coordinators or Priority Area Coordinators. It is all the more important to foster transparent and continuous communication among active Steering Group members (be it on project ideas, joint events, SG meetings or organisational issues) in order to strengthen institutional memory and exchange. The Danube Strategy Point is planning

¹²² Available here: https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/EUSDR_Consolidated-Input-Documents_AP-Revision_2019.pdf

a cross-check of contacts between Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators for the year 2020 to support streamlined communication channels.

- Furthermore, the Danube Strategy Point will try to give a positive impetus to Steering Group dynamics by carrying out a Steering Group Needs Assessment in 2020.
- Some Priority Area Coordinators report that the regular delivery of policy monitoring reports facilitates participation in Steering Groups. Others hold SG meetings back-to-back with PA related events, which increases participation at SG meetings. Others have introduced practical informative agenda points specifically dedicated to non-EU participating states to raise participation in a targeted manner. Also, some approach the improvement of SG meeting participation by inviting SG members to deliver a presentation.
- The continued involvement of Working Groups and the establishment of new ones (such as WG Disaster Management in PA 5 or the Artificial Intelligence WG of PA 8) is considered to be very useful for obtaining expert knowledge, developing project ideas and learning how to approach national policies. As pointed out among PACs, it should be considered to secure funding for WG Coordinators.

Finally, capacity building with other macro-regional strategies in various topical fields was continued (see Table 2) and was intensified, especially in the crucial field of communication. In this context, Slovenia's initiative in the framework of the Mediterranean Coast and EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week was a dynamising measure.

While cross-MRS collaboration and capacity building have intensified, also some critical voices have emerged: The different macro-regional strategies have their own specificities (for example when it comes to existing institutional set-up, size, administrative capabilities etc.) and it might be misleading in terms of monitoring and evaluation to compare, for example, ways of cooperation in different thematic fields across MRS. Some National Coordinators perceive the usefulness of cross-cutting cooperation among MRS to be limited to an expert-level exchange on practicalities and structures of governance, because thematic cooperation in a broad macro-regional framework often becomes too abstract.

Policy Impact of the Strategy remains to be strengthened

In 2019 continuous information and monitoring reports fed into Danube navigation policy; cooperation with renowned international institutions was intensified in the fields of transport management, water protection and vocational education and training; policy papers and reviews on the protection of birds, public governance and cluster capacities were elaborated (just to name three examples); a policy round table on pharmaceuticals in the environment was held; and EUSDR Priority Areas teamed up with representatives of other macro-regional strategies to lever political momentum. A lot of groundwork to influence policies was done in all Priority Areas.

However, as already concluded in the previous EUSDR Implementation Report, holding political meetings with specific thematic emphasis could be one way of further enhancing commitment to the EUSDR at the political level and at the high administrative level.

- Among National Coordinators there are two different approaches to fostering high level political commitment: Some support the idea of organising more fora for policy makers to push the EUSDR agenda and trigger a trickle-down effect to the operational levels. Others suggest to keep

gatherings at the political level scarce and limited to events with a clear added value for the respective political stakeholders in the presence of sufficient EUSDR representatives and the EU Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, bringing forward topics and results which can be easily communicated. Whichever approach is chosen, the participation of the EU Commissioner and of politicians from the country chairing the EUSDR is vital to create an attractive event for other politicians, media and the public.

- The organisation of Conferences of the Danube Parliamentarians hosted by the country holding the yearly Presidency of EUSDR could help to reach a higher political impact and put MRS into the focus of politicians.
- Another approach could also be to team up with other macro-regional strategies to arrange high level meetings such as EU Council meetings on MRS.

Political awareness on the international level could further be raised by using the geo-political overlap of EUSDR with other big initiatives of the European Union and beyond, such as the EU enlargement process, the European Green Deal, the 3 Seas Initiative and regional conventions, such as the Carpathian Convention. Political awareness could be forged by clearly communicating how the EUSDR could contribute to the implementation of these initiatives, for example by positioning the EUSDR as valuable contribution to European integration. In this way the position of the Strategy as policy influencer could be built up.

- In the context of geo-political positioning of the EUSDR, part I of the revised EUSDR Action Plan provides a good basis for further action.
- It is up to the core stakeholders of the Strategy to evaluate in which way EUSDR Priority Areas could feasibly contribute to the implementation of politically recognised initiatives while staying true to their own core concerns.
- In some EUSDR Priority Areas it would be especially beneficial to join forces with other EU and international initiatives; one example is the enhancement of mobility and connectivity in the Western Balkans (as addressed by PA 1b). Several EU and non-EU initiatives work on this matter: EUSAIR, several line DGs from the European Commission, the Transport Community, the Regional Cooperation Council, the 3 Seas Initiative, UNECE and so on. Coordination among these initiatives might yield synergies which could lead to better policy impact. Also PA 2 (Energy) plans to explore synergies with other relevant international and regional organisations.

Building up ownership at the level of the line ministries involved in each of the EUSDR participating states is another approach which builds upon capacity building (see above) and strengthened involvement of line DGs of the European Commission. This was already pointed out in the previous EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 (see p. 46).

- PA 1b has underlined that it will continue to involve representative from several relevant line DGs in its work, specifically for the purpose of strengthening policy alignment between EU member states and non-EU countries within the Strategy.
- As pointed out among Priority Area Coordinators, political commitment on the part of the European Commission could be reflected in the appointment of dedicated staff within line DGs to participate in SG meetings and represent EC at events.

Another route towards more policy impact could be securing thematic continuity among the Presidencies of the Strategy. While the political and thematic priorities of each Presidency are

obviously subject to their own choice, carrying on priorities from Presidency to Presidency until certain results are achieved, could benefit the policy impact of the Strategy.

Concentration on selected strategic projects and / or flagships would not only be beneficial in the effort to make better and more effective use of EU funds (as pointed out above). It would also be beneficial in terms of increasing policy impact, especially if resources are channelled into projects oriented towards and aligned with policy processes, specifically those which require transnational cooperation.

- Especially with regard to the latter two points, the Danube Strategy Point could be a helpful facilitator for the processes.

National and EU Documents to be aligned with the EUSDR

In the previous Implementation Report 2016-2018 the need for coordination of national documents with the EUSDR was already expressed. In this regard, the Strategy has advanced especially by preparing the EUSDR embedding process, which will hopefully result in a systematic integration of EUSDR strategic topics in mainstream programmes on national level. Another positive example is Ukraine, having reviewed its state of EUSDR implementation and having incorporated EUSDR priorities in national documents, while adapting its national development strategies and plans to the timeframe of the EU programming period (see chapter **Fehler! Verweisquelle konnte nicht gefunden werden.**). Also Montenegro has expressed its intention to align its national strategic documents with the Danube Region Strategy.

However, in view of the upcoming new EU programming period, the implementation of the Green Deal and upcoming renewals of strategic EU documents, the need for coordination on this level has been underlined even more so: EUSDR actions are actions of territorial development and many of them of urban development, too. Coordination of the Danube Region Strategy with the upcoming Territorial Agenda 2030¹²³ and with the renewal of the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities might help with the territorial adaptation of actions in general and specifically with territorial adaptation in support of e.g. the European Skills Agenda and the Green Deal. In this regard, it is yet to be seen how measures under the European Green Deal will be financed and implemented both within the EU member states and the candidate and neighbouring countries of the Danube Region Strategy.

- Strengthened communication between EUSDR representatives and the European Commission's line DGs might prove to be useful for the alignment of the Strategy and the above mentioned EU documents. Thematic and financial expert support on behalf of the Joint Research Centre regarding RIS3 development in the Danube Region has already been underlined by NCs as a good practice example.

EUSDR Monitoring and Evaluation has advanced and will be continued

The first step of a two-step Evaluation Plan, set up in the previous reporting period, has been carried out in 2019: the EUSDR Operational Evaluation conducted by Metis, on behalf of the Danube Strategy Point, and published in June 2019 has shown that cooperation structures and new partnerships have been established¹²⁴, workflows and communication flows are satisfactory and Steering Group involvement and spill-over of the EUSDR agenda to the national level could be strengthened. The labelling of strategic projects is yet to be taken on. These points reinforce the statements by NCs and

¹²³ More information available here: <https://territorialagenda.eu/home.html>

¹²⁴ Also see EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018, p.47.

PACs shared in the above conclusions. EUSDR internal work- and communication flows are to be further improved under the Croatian EUSDR Presidency by updating the NC Rules of Procedure and by elaborating the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper. A number of ideas to improve participation in SG meetings has been collected (see above); EU candidate and neighbouring countries have set themselves the task of aligning national strategic documents with the EUSDR; finally, the task of elaborating guidelines for identifying and listing projects of strategic value will be addressed by the Danube Strategy Point.

Further to the issue of monitoring, NCs and PACs have brought forward the elaboration of an adequate PAC reporting template. For 2020 the Danube Strategy Point together with SG DANUVAL plans the finalisation of the template as well as coordination and harmonisation with the PACs' reporting to the European Commission and the Danube Transnational Programme in order to minimise administrative burden.

A second evaluation, namely an impact evaluation of the EUSDR is planned by the Danube Strategy Point for 2021 and is to bring forward Priority Areas in monitoring progress in achieving their set actions and targets. Since the formulation of indicators and baselines for the EUSDR targets of the revised Action Plan was not finalised¹²⁵, measuring progress in the impact achieved will pose a special challenge. As summarised by one PAC: "If concrete outputs or statistical targets are named, it should be within the capacity of PAs to have an actual, tangible impact on these outputs or targets".

Complementing the efforts on EUSDR level, also ESPON advanced in elaborating the European and Macro-Regional Territorial Monitoring Tool with the support of MRS core stakeholders. The tool, which is expected to be finalised in 2020, is highly anticipated as it could prove to be useful in communicating pressing issues and setting them on the political agenda.

Outlook

Having revised and updated the EUSDR Action Plan - the core document of the Strategy, having prepared the alignment of the Strategy with EU funding sources, having brought forward monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy and having improved EUSDR communication on all levels, a lot of groundwork has been done to pave the way for an effective second decade of implementation of the Danube Region Strategy in the upcoming years. While some challenges within the Strategy persist, more and more ideas have been gathered to counter these longstanding challenges. **The upcoming years will not only provide the opportunity to jointly put these ideas into practice, but also improve connectivity, environmental protection, prosperity, governance and security in the Danube Region by implementing the new EUSDR Action Plan, finalising the EUSDR embedding process and strengthening cooperation within the EU as well as with non-EU member states in the Danube Region.**

¹²⁵ As part of the elaboration of the Consolidated Input for the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan, PACs and SGs partly defined indicators and baselines. However, this task could not be finalised in a consistent and comprehensive manner due to the inherent difficulty of defining valid and meaningful indicators which can be influenced by EUSDR activities.



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