

28th Meeting of the Steering Group of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation” of the EUSDR (PA10)

- Minutes -

14-15 May, 2025 | Hotel Courtyard Sarajevo | Skenderija 1, Sarajevo, 71000 Bosnia and Herzegovina

Main Outcomes

AT	BA	BG	CZ	DE	HR	HU	MD	ME	RO	RS	SI	SK	UA	EC	EESC	DRP	CEI	DSP	DCSF
+	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	-	+	+

Participants:

9 out of 14 EUSDR countries were represented at the 28th Meeting of the Steering Group of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation” (see **Annex II. Participants list**). Hence, the quorum was reached. The following countries were represented: AT, BA, CZ, DE (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), HR, HU, ME, RO and SI.

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Furthermore, the European Commission (DG REGIO), the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and The Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF) participated.

Main outcomes of the discussion:

- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the EUSDR Presidency Programme.
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the European Commission’s 5th biannual report on the Implementation of the Macro-Regional Strategies.
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the Harvesting reports and if interested will ask DG REGIO for further information.
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategy Days (24–25 September 2025) and, that registrations will open in mid-June, with a draft agenda to follow.
- PA10 AT will share information regarding the opening of registrations for the MRSs Days as well as the implementation report and additional documents.
- PA10 (City of Vienna) would prepare a draft proposal outlining potential activities regarding digitalisation in the public sector.
- PA 10 (City of Vienna) will send the final summary of the “Stronger Together” event to the Steering Group Members.
- PA10 (City of Vienna) will organise a separate online consultation for SG members ahead of the Danube Participation Day.
- PA 10 (City of Vienna) raised the possibility of organising an Extended Steering Group meeting on the topics of cross-border/macro-regional cooperation for emergency healthcare and/or stakeholder cooperation in crisis management
- The PA 10 Steering Group voted on the EUSDR PA 10 Flagships for 2025: Healthcare Cross-border Emergency Services, Danube Participation Day, and Caring Communities.
- PA 10 (City of Vienna) will share information regarding the government task force as they will receive it.
- PA 10 (City of Vienna) will share more detailed information from the Danube Region Programme on the upcoming call when received.

Upcoming events:

- The 5th National Participation Day Ukraine, 4 July 2025, Odessa region Ukraine
- ESF+ Network in the Danube Region on-site meeting, 25-26 September 2025, Bratislava Slovakia
- Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week 15-18 September 2025, Izola Slovenia
- EU Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days 2025, 24-25 September 2025, Brussels Belgium
- 12th Danube Participation Day, 4th November 2025, Sarajevo Bosnia and Herzegovina
- EUSDR Annual Forum, 5-6 November, 2025 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- 29th EUSDR PA10 Steering Group Meeting 2025, Prague Czech Republic

Wednesday, 24 April 2024 | Day 1

Welcome Address & Introduction

Claudia SINGER-SMITH (PAC 10/City of Vienna) opened the 28th Meeting of the PA10 Steering Group, expressing her pleasure at convening the meeting in Sarajevo under the auspices of Bosnia and Herzegovina's EUSDR Presidency. She noted that the agenda (see **Annex I. Agenda**) and supplementary documents had been distributed in advance and are accessible via a QR code provided on the slide, with an accompanying password. Claudia SINGER-SMITH then invited Midhat DŽEMIĆ (Directorate for European Integration, Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency) to address the meeting.

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Midhat DŽEMIĆ welcomed participants and expressed his appreciation for the cooperation in preparing the meeting. He indicated that further details regarding the Presidency's programme would be shared later in the session. Mr. DŽEMIĆ highlighted the fruitful collaboration with PA10 and its involvement in numerous events, with further elaboration to follow. He also encouraged participants to take the opportunity to explore and enjoy the city of Sarajevo.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH expressed her gratitude for the successful cooperation with Bosnia and Herzegovina during its term as EUSDR Presidency. She then provided a brief introduction and initiated the "Tour de Table" to allow all participants, including newcomers, to introduce themselves.

Participants introduced themselves during the Tour de Table. Quorum for the meeting was confirmed.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH reminded all attendees to use microphones for the purposes of audio recording. She clarified that the recordings would not be publicly shared but would be used internally to assist in the production of the official meeting minutes. The meeting proceeded to the first official item on the agenda. Claudia SINGER-SMITH invited Midhat DŽEMIĆ to present the activities carried out under the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR).

Programme and Activities of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency Item 2

Midhat DŽEMIĆ began by noting the financial constraints faced by the Presidency due to the non-adoption of institutional budgets for 2025. As a result, activities are being managed with the funds available from the previous year. Despite this, the Presidency has adapted effectively and continues to implement its planned initiatives. He presented (see **Annex III. SG PA10 PCY PPNT**) the strategic priorities of the Presidency, which included accelerating the European integration process, identified as the top priority; tackling brain drain, the widening skills gap, depopulation, and youth unemployment, particularly in rural areas.

Furthermore, he stated the thematic focuses as follows:

- Security, civil protection, and disaster preparedness, noting that a proposal from PA11 is still awaited.
- Connectivity and green transition.

- Education and labour market alignment.
- Contributions to the UN Agenda 2030 (SDGs) and the South East Europe 2030 Strategy, in cooperation with the Regional Cooperation Council.
- Gender equality.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ then provided a summary of past and upcoming events during the Presidency:

- PAC Meeting held in Sarajevo on 26–27 February.
- Thematic event on disaster risk and water management, held in Mostar on 3 April, co-organised with PA10, Croatia, PA5, the Regional Cooperation Council, and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River.
- National Coordinators (NC) Meeting held in Sarajevo on 9–10 April.
- National Participation Day, held the day before this meeting (22 May).
- PA10 Steering Group Meeting (current session)

Claudia SINGER-SMITH noted that a proposal from their side for a workshop on local development had not been included in the overview presented by Midhat DŽEMIĆ.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ acknowledged the omission and added the proposed workshop to the Annual Forum programme

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Stefan LÜTGNAU (Danube Civil Society Forum/ DCSF) enquired about the confirmed venue for the Annual Forum and the Danube Participation Day.

Naida DILIĆ confirmed that both events will be held at Hotel Holiday.

Claudia Singer thanked Midhat DŽEMIĆ for the updates on forthcoming events and for the overview of the Annual Forum preparations. She reiterated that she would resend the proposal for the local development workshop to ensure it is considered in the planning. She then introduced the next agenda item.

Outcomes:

[PA10 took note of the EUSDR Presidency Programme.](#)

Updates from the European Commission

Item 3

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK (Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy/DG REGIO) reported (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 2-9**) that the European Commission had published the 5th biannual report on the implementation of Macro-Regional Strategies just the day before. The report, covering the period from mid-2022 to mid-2024, had been presented to the Regional Committee of the European Parliament. The delay in publication was due to the transition between the outgoing and incoming College of Commissioners, with the new Commissioner, Raffaele Fitto, now overseeing the policy.

The report focuses solely on the four Macro-Regional Strategies (MRSs) and excludes Sea Basin Strategies, though coordination with these is increasing.

Key Features of the Report:

- Stronger emphasis on EU enlargement, reflecting changing political and strategic priorities.
- Analysis of how public institutions adapt to evolving environments.
- Governance issues and suggestions for improvement are explored in greater depth.
- Encouragement for strategies to revise or adapt their Action Plans, as has been done by the EUSDR (2020) and more recently by the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy (EUSAIR).

- Continued relevance of themes such as sustainability, digitalisation, and inclusive development (e.g. social initiatives involving marginalised communities).

Furthermore, Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK continues with the Council Recommendations and Strategy Alignment with EU Priorities. She states that the report reflects the Council's encouragement for strategies to contribute to enlargement preparations. She also emphasised the role of macro-regional strategies in supporting Ukraine and Moldova, stabilisation efforts, and addressing demographic and economic challenges.

She also announces the Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategy Days (24–25 September 2025) which will be organised in collaboration with DG MARE. The format will include practical sessions and “speed dating” with line DG representatives to foster engagement and cooperation. Registrations will open in mid-June, with a draft agenda to follow.

With regards to Cohesion Policy Post-2027 and Consultation Results: A wide-ranging consultation involving Interreg programmes, MRSs, and the general public was conducted, culminating in the “Harvesting Report.” The report, recently presented in Gorizia in March, 2025 received high-level political endorsement, including from two Commissioners and several national ministers. The consultation recognised Interreg and MRSs as key drivers for European cohesion and integration.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK concluded by inviting all stakeholders to actively engage with the content of the report and to reflect on how to strengthen cooperation between strategies and cohesion policy instruments. She also welcomed further discussion during the upcoming MRS Days in September.

András EDELÉNY (European Economic and Social Committee/ EESC) thanked the Commission for compiling and presenting the biannual report and also extended appreciation to the MRSs for their substantial contributions to it. He noted that it is a standard exercise for EESC to issue an official opinion on this report each year. Due to the ongoing mandate change within the institution, this year's opinion will be prepared under an emergency procedure and is expected to be released either in June or July. He pointed out that when it comes to more abstract policy instruments, such as the European Semester, awareness drops further to approximately 20–25%. He continued by noting that while central governmental institutions in Member States are generally well-informed, the situation deteriorates as one moves down to the regional and especially municipal levels, where both the intensity of engagement and the institutional capacity are significantly weaker.

Touching on the political coordination of the strategies, András EDELÉNY observed that in most Member States, this responsibility lies with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs. While this is considered appropriate, he remarked that the portfolio and influence of these ministries vary widely across the European Union. For example, in Hungary, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also handles trade, whereas in other countries, foreign ministries are confined to diplomatic functions. He suggested that the EU should consider reinforcing the human and financial resources of these ministries, particularly through regional development portfolios, to support their coordination roles in the MRSs.

Finally, he addressed the thematic focus of future cooperation and strategy development. He highlighted that one particularly pressing issue from the perspective of macro-regional strategies is water. He recalled that EESC had launched the European Blue Deal about six months ago, an initiative that, while not formally part of the European Green Deal, is intended to complement it on an equal footing. He concluded by strongly recommending intensified cooperation in the field of water management.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH responded by acknowledging András EDELÉNY's final point and noted that several of the existing Priority Areas within the Danube Strategy already focus on environmental protection,

including water management. She assured the participants that this issue would continue to be covered by those areas. She then offered a brief additional remark based on András EDELÉNY's comments about improved coordination between the MRSs and Interreg. She agreed that developing joint schemes and enhancing capitalisation of results is critical. She also emphasised the importance for the Steering Group to be very clear when discussing strategic actions, particularly in identifying the topics and measures that should be implemented and coordinated. She noted that many of the Steering Group members come from Ministries of Regional Development and are involved in shaping territorial development policies. Therefore, she urged everyone to consider, as they deliberate over the next two days, where they want to focus efforts. She explained that doing so will make it easier for programmes to determine what themes to fund and prioritise, ensuring that the resulting projects are directly relevant to their policy and strategic discussions.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ addressed a question to Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK, referencing earlier remarks about DG ENEST. He raised a concern regarding the difficulty of securing active participation from the responsible units within DG ENEST in relation to the MRSs, particularly the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy. He explained that, despite obligations under the ongoing project to engage DG ENEST, their efforts have been unsuccessful. A meeting had taken place the previous week to discuss how to bring DG ENEST on board, but the challenges remain. He elaborated that DG ENEST is structured into several units, one dealing with the Western Balkans, another with Moldova, a third with Ukraine, making it complex to identify the right point of contact. He suggested that if the focus could be placed specifically on the Western Balkans, colleagues from Moldova and Ukraine would also have relevant insights to contribute.

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Midhat DŽEMIĆ then brought up a second issue, referring to a discussion document being prepared in anticipation of a joint meeting of national coordinators from the Adriatic-Ionian and Danube Strategies. The document is being developed with support from the Danube Strategy Point (DSP). He noted that he had considered involving PA10, given the relevance of funding issues, and asked whether such involvement might be appropriate.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH responded by expressing openness to any contributions that could enrich the document or the process.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ acknowledged the response and said he would check the matter further in due course.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK clarified that involvement with DG ENEST is currently being coordinated by a colleague who serves as team leader for the Adriatic-Ionian Region. Therefore, the matter is being looked into. She suggested that it might be more effective to reach out to counterparts at the EU Delegation in Sarajevo rather than trying to secure engagement directly from Brussels-based officials.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ replied that, in his experience, initiating engagement with the EU delegations requires prior contact with DG ENEST. He explained that delegations typically do not deal directly with MRSs but instead focus on transnational programmes. In the case of the EU Delegation in Sarajevo, he noted that no one is currently responsible for MRSs. He also shared that during last year's DG-level meeting, which is planned to be repeated this year, the representative sent from DG NEAR was widely considered to lack the necessary expertise for a productive discussion.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK acknowledged the feedback and suggested that perhaps the matter could be followed up bilaterally. She noted that it is important to manage expectations, as events structured in a speed-dating format are not designed to host director-level officials. However, participants were asked to pre-identify the topics they wished to discuss with different DGs. She stated that she would follow up with colleagues to ensure that future DG representatives are appropriately briefed and selected based on the topics at hand.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH agreed that it may be helpful to explore how communication with the relevant DGs could be facilitated. She suggested a pragmatic approach of working through DG ENEST step by step until a responsive contact is identified. She emphasized that this topic would require further consideration.

Following this exchange, Claudia SINGER-SMITH transitioned the meeting to the next agenda item, which was the review of progress on Action 1: Improving institutional capacities in order to provide high-quality public services. She noted that one of the most prominent themes recently discussed under this action has been the digitalisation of the public sector.

Outcomes:

The PA10 Steering group took note of the European Commission's 5th biannual report on the Implementation of the Macro-Regional Strategies.

PA10 Steering Group took note of the Harvesting reports and if interested will ask DG REGIO for further information.

The PA10 Steering Group took note of the Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategy Days (24–25 September 2025) and that registrations will open in mid-June, with a draft agenda to follow.

PA10 AT will share information regarding the opening of registrations for the MRSs Days as well as the implementation report and additional documents.

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Progressing Institutional Capacity and Cooperation in the Danube Region I

Item 4

ACTION 1: To improve institutional capacities in order to provide high-quality public services

Andreea PRASACU (PA 10/ City of Vienna) opened the floor by recalling that digitalisation (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 10-11**) has been a central topic for the Steering Group over the past years, most recently highlighted during the last meeting in Stuttgart. She referenced the relevant working document, *Advancing the institutional capacities for public sector: digitalisation in the Danube Region* digitalisation (see **Annex V. Item 4_Digitalisation of public spaces**), noted that the discussion today would build upon those reflections and strategies. Several potential next steps for developing this topic had already been proposed, including bilateral exchanges with relevant stakeholders, organizing a seminar on digitalisation, and mapping existing initiatives across Member States. Andreea PRASACU emphasised that themes such as data protection, interoperability, legal frameworks, and public participation had been identified as priority topics. She encouraged the participants to reflect on the questions that had been shared with them in advance, share any updates from their countries, or present new ideas that could inform a common direction. She concluded her remarks by reiterating the importance of understanding participants' needs and priorities and reminded everyone that during the last extended Steering Group meeting, the potential for cooperation between academia and the private sector had also been raised.

Teresa STUMMER (Department for International and European Affairs, Lower Austria) contributed by providing an example from Lower Austria, where digitalisation, including new AI technologies, has become a significant topic, especially at the regional and community levels. She noted the establishment of the "House of Digitalisation" two years ago in Tulln, near Vienna, which serves as an innovation hub. The centre has recently offered workshops for businesses and municipalities, recognizing that many communities still lack expertise in digitalisation and AI. She suggested that this angle of AI in regional and community settings could be integrated into the broader discussion.

Andreea PRASACU acknowledged this input, confirming that the topic of AI had also emerged during the extended Steering Group meeting, including examples from Baden-Württemberg.

Fiona FAAS (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg, DE) added that beyond the technical aspects of digitalisation and AI, her team is especially interested in the human factors: trust and literacy in new technologies, stakeholder engagement, and participation at the local level. She stressed the importance of involving civil society in these processes. Furthermore, she expressed openness to have a closer look into the European Health Data Space, as it aligns with the Steering Group's two main priorities: healthcare cooperation and digitalisation.

András EDELÉNY made a brief recommendation grounded in recent experience. He complimented Fiona FAAS's remarks on the interface between traditional digitalisation and AI, and further highlighted the essential link between digitalisation and data. He stressed that without consistent, reliable data, digitalisation efforts lack substance. He also pointed out recurring issues such as the lack of standardized data, fragmented collection methods, and uneven territorial coverage. He suggested that the MRSs could play a role in harmonizing data collection practices, particularly in areas like healthcare emergency cooperation, disaster response, and emerging topics like water management.

Bernd ZISCHLER (Bavarian State Ministry of the Interior, for Sport and Integration, DE) offered a suggestion from Bavaria, noting that the region has a dedicated Ministry for Digitalisation that is already involved in cross-border projects. He proposed reaching out to his colleagues in that Ministry to see if they could contribute further ideas or input to the group.

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Andreea PRASACU welcomed this idea and underscored the need for purposeful and meaningful digitalisation and supported the idea of combining relevant topics and possibly organizing a seminar or bilateral meetings to further develop the topic. She reiterated that the direction would ultimately depend on the group's collective input.

Stefan LÜTGNAU then suggested that relevant projects within the Danube Programme could be leveraged, particularly those focusing on rural areas. He cited the D-Clean project, which addresses sewage water and stormwater management in underdeveloped rural areas of the Danube Region. The project is led by the University of Life Sciences and targets concrete issues with tangible effects. He noted the potential to connect such projects to broader digitalisation and water management efforts and stated that she would check with the project leader for further alignment opportunities.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH responded to the ongoing discussion by expressing a need for caution regarding the boundaries between digitalisation, data policies, and overlapping priority areas. She pointed out that with 12 priority areas in total, it is essential to ensure clarity in mandates and responsibilities. While digitalisation of the public sector is indeed important, she urged participants to be mindful of where their discussions or initiatives might cross into areas managed by other Priority Areas, such as environmental protection or business innovation potentially duplicating efforts. She proposed that a useful direction would be to examine how digitalisation strategies particularly within regional or national programming interface with transnational or cross-border cooperation. She advised that participants should reach out to relevant ministries or agencies in their regions that handle digitalisation policy, especially if they are involved in regional programming, and bring those perspectives back to the group. By sharing such insights, the group could better coordinate and organise stakeholders for impactful, strategic projects in the future.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ added to this by noting his experience during the preparation of the Presidency Programme and the accompanying Annual Forum. He had worked with several teams including those focused on

digitalisation, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and data analytics, particularly those supporting business. He recommended that PA10 coordinate closely with PA8 to avoid duplication and promote synergy, particularly since an event on digitalisation is being planned. He mentioned having been in contact with PA8, and noted that this upcoming event, featuring experts from Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Hungary, would be a valuable opportunity for collaboration.

Fiona FAAS supported this suggestion and brought attention to a recent study by PA8, which aimed to identify "lighthouse projects" in the Danube Region. One of the thematic areas of that study focused specifically on virtual worlds, AI and digitalisation. Although the study had not yet been published, she recommended reviewing it once available to see if there are relevant examples tied to public administration. She mentioned having attended the Metaverse Congress in Stuttgart the previous week, where PA8 was represented. A standout example discussed there was "Gametherapy" from Slovakia, a platform using virtual reality to diagnose neurodegenerative diseases. She noted that this initiative also ties into the Steering Group's healthcare discussions and might be a source of inspiration or linkage.

Teresa STUMMER added that while technical aspects of digitalisation are important, PA10 might be particularly well-placed to tackle the social and institutional dimension namely, trust building. She shared that in many German-speaking regions, there remains a significant degree of public scepticism regarding data collection, artificial intelligence, and digitalisation in general. She suggested that addressing this lack of trust through foundational work and communication might fall under PA10's sphere of activity, more so than under other priority areas.

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Claudia SINGER-SMITH thanked the group for these valuable contributions and announced that, as a next step, PA10 would prepare a draft proposal outlining potential activities regarding digitalisation. She also acknowledged the useful information about the PA8 survey and noted that PA10 had collaborated with PA8 in the past on business support and public administration, suggesting that this could be a moment to renew that partnership. She welcomed any additional feedback or input and reiterated that the floor remained open for further thoughts. The Steering Group did not have any further comments.

Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ (Ministry of European Affairs, ME) took the floor to present (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 12-15**) an ongoing project in Montenegro aimed at transforming the public sector and supporting the country's EU accession process. He began by explaining that the information gathered for this presentation had been compiled through coordination with various ministries participating in the initiative. He provided an overview of the key aspects of the project. The policy areas supported include health, environment, innovation, entrepreneurship, tax administration, government organisation, and the use of technologies. The overarching aim of the project is to modernise the government structure in a sustainable way and to align Montenegro more closely with the EU acquis, thereby accelerating the country's path toward EU membership. He also highlighted that this project was selected because it supports non-EU countries participating in EU macro-regional strategies, specifically EUSAIR and EUSDR.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH responded positively, describing the initiative as very interesting and promising. She remarked that the involvement of numerous ministries was notable and welcomed the project's multidimensional approach, particularly its inclusion of youth and civil society in democratic processes. She emphasised the value of monitoring how these inclusive practices are implemented over time, noting that capacity building for resilient and participatory governance often proceeds at varying speeds.

She continued by suggesting that this initiative could inform broader capitalisation efforts by looking across different but thematically aligned projects throughout the region. Recalling similar efforts discussed during the previous meeting in Stuttgart particularly from Romania, she proposed that this project from

Montenegro be viewed in the broader context of making public administrations “fit for purpose” at all levels. She invited other participants to share further examples of related initiatives that might collectively enrich this agenda.

Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ added that his colleagues in Montenegro are currently conducting a monitoring phase for the project. He committed to providing updates at future meetings, which would allow the group to track the project’s development and its outcomes.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK then followed up with several questions for clarification. First, she asked who was responsible for carrying out the project specifically, whether an NGO or another type of actor was facilitating the process. Second, she wondered whether any changes had already been implemented as a result of the initiative, although she acknowledged that it might be too early to assess impact. Finally, she inquired about the geographic scope of the project, asking which other Western Balkan countries besides Montenegro were also benefitting from this initiative.

Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ responded to earlier questions from Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK by clarifying that, at this point, they had not yet received detailed information regarding the involvement of local authorities and civil society organisations in other Western Balkan countries. He offered to send follow-up updates after the meeting as more information becomes available. He emphasised that, in Montenegro, various ministries are managing the implementation of the project and are expected to coordinate with NGOs. He noted there is strong interest from civil society to be actively involved in the project, indicating an encouraging level of engagement from non-governmental stakeholders.

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In a follow-up question, Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK inquired whether this was a nationally funded initiative or part of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ confirmed that the project is co-financed, with contributions from both national sources and IPA funding. When asked if the project falls under the Interreg programme, he affirmed that it does, aligning it with the framework of EU-supported cross-border cooperation.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH thanked Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ and Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK for the clarification and announced the conclusion of Action 1, which focused on improving institutional capacities to provide high-quality public services. She briefly summarised the themes covered under this action, including digitalisation, cross-border cooperation, and strengthening public administration through inclusive and strategic initiatives. She then introduced Action 2, noting a small adjustment to the agenda due to time constraints. Instead of proceeding with the originally scheduled sequence, the group would next hear about progress under Action 2, beginning with a presentation of the SMURD cross-border project involving Romania and the Republic of Moldova. She welcomed Colonel Alin MAGHIAR (Ministry of Interior Affairs, RO) who had joined the meeting online.

Outcomes:

PA10 AT would prepare a draft proposal outlining potential activities regarding digitalisation in the public sector

Action 2: To facilitate the administrative cooperation of communities living in border regions

Colonel Alin MAGHIAR (Ministry of Interior Affairs, RO) presented a detailed overview of the SMURD (Mobile Emergency Service for Resuscitation and Extrication) initiative (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 20-37**), focusing on its expansion through cross-border cooperation between Romania and the Republic of Moldova. He began by outlining the origins of SMURD in Romania, highlighting it as a multi-agency emergency response system integrating hospital emergency departments, fire and ambulance services, and

air rescue units. The service has significantly improved emergency response times and survival rates, becoming a regional best practice. The cross-border dimension of SMURD began through the formal intergovernmental agreement signed in 2014, which enabled mutual assistance in disaster and emergency medical response. This marked the launch of the first SMURD cross-border project, with a budget of €6.6 million, aimed at developing legal frameworks, purchasing rescue and medical equipment (including helicopters and specialized vehicles), and conducting joint training exercises. Colonel MAGHIAR then introduced the SMURD 2 project, launched in 2019 with an expanded budget of €10 million. It continues and deepens cross-border collaboration through:

- The construction of new emergency infrastructure (e.g., land operation points in Ungheni and Cantemir)
- Delivery of eight new intervention vehicles
- Establishment of a dedicated training centre in Iași, the first of its kind in the region
- Continued collaboration with health ministries and emergency institutions on both sides

Training and operational procedures were further aligned through joint workshops, the development of a Joint Intervention Plan, and simulation exercises to test real-time coordination and response. Col. Alin MAGHIAR emphasized that the project strengthened trust and operational efficiency between Romanian and Moldovan emergency responders, citing successful joint interventions, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and forest fire operations in Greece in 2021. In closing, he noted the partnership's commitment to long-term sustainability and future funding applications, affirming that SMURD has become a cornerstone of EU-supported regional cooperation. He invited participants to reach out for further details or to connect with relevant institutions for follow-up.

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Claudia SINGER-SMITH thanked Col. Alin MAGHIAR for the insightful presentation and praised the project as a valuable example of transnational capacity building and emergency preparedness in the Danube region. She noted that this project, focused on cross-border emergency medical services, builds well on earlier presentations, particularly those related to civil protection mechanisms in Baden-Württemberg. CSS emphasized the value of examining how such multi-stakeholder emergency response systems function not just in the health domain but also in broader disaster risk management contexts. Importantly, she pointed out how meaningful it is to see such close cooperation between EU and non-EU states in the region.

Turning to the next item on the agenda, Claudia SINGER-SMITH introduced the topic of the “Stronger Together” event, which had been referenced earlier in the meeting. Andreea PRASACU was invited to elaborate on the event and its outcomes.

Andreea PRASACU began by explaining that the event titled “*Enhancing Regional Cooperation in the Danube Basin: Stronger Together*” (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 16-19**) had become something of a motto its phrase appearing in every email related to its organisation. The event had focused on several core topics including water management, emergency response, and disaster risk management. The PA10 team was responsible for one of the event's world café sessions, which centred on “Emergency and Disaster Risk Management.” This session was designed to be highly interactive and participatory, providing an open space for stakeholders to exchange experiences and good practices. The structure of the session was divided into two thematic parts: preparedness and response. In the preparedness section, Andreea PRASACU shared that several projects were presented.

Furthermore, a key part of the session involved engaging participants directly. They were asked whether they had personally experienced a disaster, as those with first-hand experience often bring valuable insights. The discussion revealed that the most important factors in preparedness include strong

community engagement, coordinated governmental frameworks, and volunteer mobilization. One particularly notable example was an app developed by the PA5 Disaster Management group, which allows volunteers to register and be notified in real time during emergencies. The tool highlighted how digital innovation can support rapid and efficient civil society engagement. The second half of the session focused on response. While many participants agreed that preparedness is crucial and can greatly reduce the effort needed during the response phase, it was acknowledged that disasters are inherently unpredictable and demand strong reaction capacities. In this context, the group emphasised the need for clear communication, cross-sectoral collaboration, and, once again, community-driven strategies as key components of an effective disaster response system. Andreea PRASACU, concluded by noting that an official summary of the event is in the final stages of completion and will be shared with participants once all specifics are finalised.

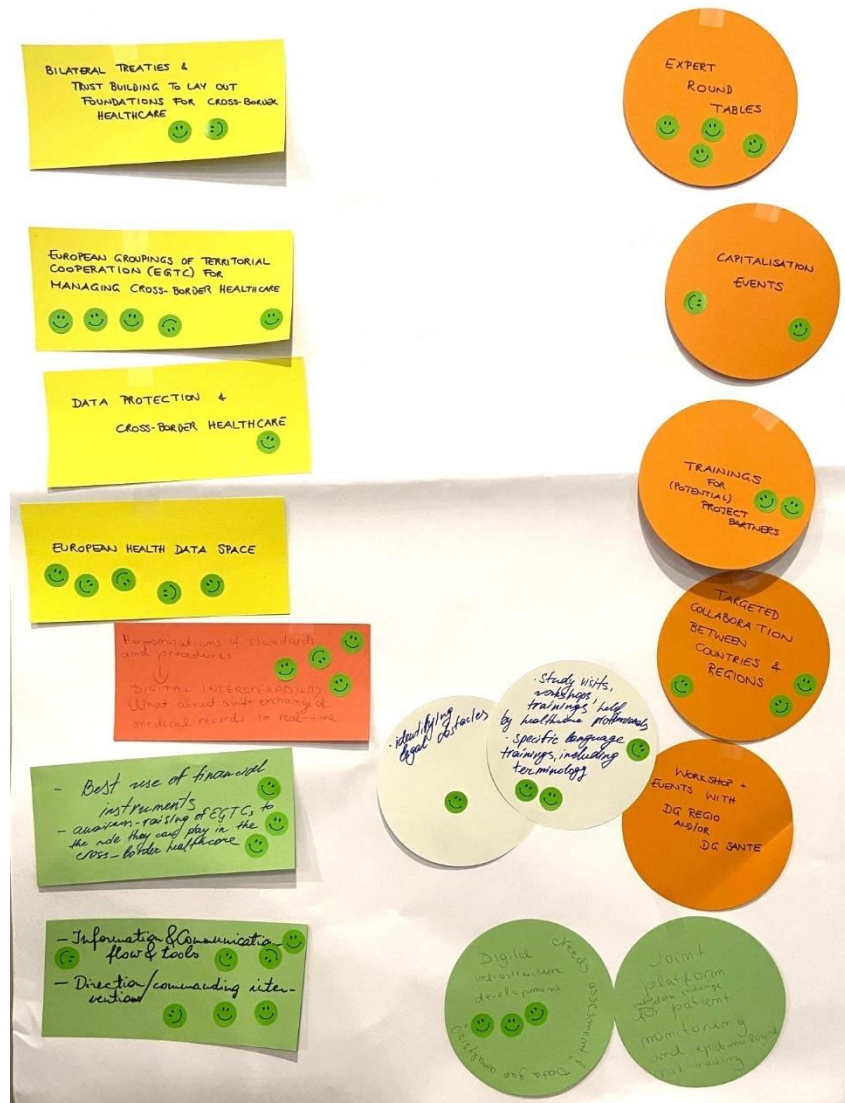
Claudia SINGER-SMITH highlighted that discussions from the “Stronger Together” event complement broader efforts across the Danube Region to build resilience and foster cross-border cooperation, not only in emergency health care, but also in integrated disaster risk management. She highlighted the role played by PA5, which also coordinated the water management discussions during the event. One of the key takeaways was the importance of enhancing the connection with the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), particularly through more structured training activities. She suggested that such trainings should not be limited to bilateral cooperation but instead be scaled up to macro-regional and transnational levels, aligning better with the scope of challenges faced in the Danube Region. She concluded by noting that these topics remain highly relevant and that the Steering Group may consider holding an extended meeting in the future to explore what additional steps could be taken and which stakeholders should be further engaged.

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Claudia SINGER-SMITH introduced the session on advancing cross-border emergency healthcare cooperation (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 38-40**), referencing the working document *Next Steps for PA10 Cooperation on Cross-border Emergency Healthcare* (see **Annex VI. Item 4_Cross-border Healthcare**), circulated beforehand to guide the discussion. She briefly recapped previous discussions that had focused on key challenges such as emergency healthcare across borders, the legal and administrative frameworks, equipment, and cultural factors. Building on past activities and the outcomes from a recent meeting in Stuttgart, she stated the aim to move toward more practical and actionable steps to support stakeholders in this field.

The focus was placed on prioritising topics identified previously, including the European Health Data Space, data protection issues in cross-border healthcare, the role of the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), and activities that could align with these themes. Claudia SINGER-SMITH emphasized the importance of trust as a foundation for effective bilateral treaties and cross-border cooperation, noting that legal agreements alone are insufficient without mutual confidence.

Participants were encouraged to reflect in groups on additional topics or specific challenges they face, areas where knowledge exchange is needed, and ideas for activities that would support progress. They were provided with post-it's to note down their inputs.



Following this brainstorming session, Claudia SINGER-SMITH guided the group through prioritising the identified topics and activities. The prioritised themes included enhancing digital interoperability, enabling the swift real-time exchange of medical records, optimizing financial instruments, and raising awareness of EGTC's potential role in cross-border health cooperation. Key activities highlighted were expert roundtables, capitalisation events, training sessions for prospective project partners, collaboration between regions, and coordinated events involving DG REGIO and DG SANTE. Additional needs such as language training (including specialised medical terminology), identifying legal obstacles, and developing joint platforms for medical data exchange were also noted as priorities.

Outcomes:

PA 10 AT will send the final summary of the “Stronger Together” event to the Steering Group Members. PA 10 AT raised the possibility of organising an Extended Steering Group meeting on the topics of cross-border/macro-regional cooperation for emergency healthcare and/or stakeholder cooperation in crisis management.

Progressing Institutional Capacity and Cooperation in the Danube Region II

Item 5 & 6

Action 3: To review bottlenecks relating to the low absorption rate of EU funds and invest EU

Claudia SINGER-SMITH introduced the next point on the agenda: a presentation of the NONA project (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 41-45**), a key initiative under the Danube Region Programme aimed at enhancing territorial planning in line with the green transition. The project's overarching goals include building the capacities of cities and municipalities not only in drafting strategic territorial plans but also in developing concrete investment strategies. She emphasised that the NONA project isn't just about data collection; it represents a full cycle from data production to participatory governance, and from planning to investment.

The project's innovative approach aligns with the New European Bauhaus and has received recognition from the European Commission, having been selected for EXPO 2025. In addition, she encouraged participants to think about how these outputs can be disseminated, possibly replicated in other regions, and integrated into discussions around the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MAFF), especially regarding the diversification of funding sources. A follow-up meeting with the project's lead partner is scheduled, where next steps for promoting the project results in the Danube Region will be explored.

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Action 4: To support better coordination of funding

Transitioning to the ESF Network of Managing Authorities, Claudia SINGER-SMITH offered a brief overview of ongoing and upcoming activities (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 46-48**). The 11th meeting of the ESF Network was held in September of the previous year, where joint priorities for cooperation between ESF+ managing authorities and IPA programmes were identified. This was followed by an April meeting focused on the operationalisation of green skills, showcasing how shared themes can drive cooperation across funding instruments. Another key topic under discussion is the Simplified Cost Option (SCO), with growing interest in exploring its use for transnational cooperation and how this affects funding control and oversight. These issues are of particular interest for national and regional programmes as they prepare for the upcoming programming period.

Looking ahead, the next onsite meeting is planned for 25–26 September in Bratislava, organised in collaboration with PA9. The agenda will include a continued focus on SCO, as well as youth employment and labour market inclusion though it was noted that this will coincide with MRSs Day.

CSS also shared that there are ongoing discussions around drafting a non-paper or position paper with policy recommendations for the next ESF+ programming period. The main vision includes:

- Supporting innovative and state-of-the-art social policies,
- Highlighting the benefits of linking macro-regional strategies (MRSs) with cohesion programmes,
- Ensuring stable and predictable funding, reducing administrative burdens, and
- Strengthening the strategic impact and political visibility of transnational cooperation.

Further deliberation on the non-paper will take place in September, in line with broader policy development timelines.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK sought clarification regarding the expressed intention to continue cooperation between MRSs and cohesion policy programmes. She suggested that this likely referred to the existing

obligation for such programmes to consider supporting relevant MRS priorities, which remains a discretionary decision by each programme. She questioned whether there was anything more substantial underpinning this wish.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH responded by affirming that, essentially, this is indeed the main point to ensure that the existing provision continues into future programming periods. While it is ultimately up to the programmes how to take MRSs into account, past experience has shown that without such a formal provision, it is unlikely to happen. She also emphasised that many competing influences come into play during the programming phase, and unless a clear obligation exists, MRSs risk being overlooked.

She noted that while the quality of the link between MRSs and cohesion programmes varies, this is precisely the area they are working to improve. Ideally, she explained, a constructive and results-oriented relationship with the programmes should be built, but maintaining a legal provision is crucial to ensuring MRSs are not excluded from consideration. Raising awareness and securing a continued formal link is the priority.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK followed up with a reflection on how, even in the absence of a binding provision, national coordinators might already be finding effective ways to involve MRSs in mainstream programming. She suggested that some national coordinators could serve as members of the monitoring committees of cohesion programmes, thus bringing MRS perspectives directly into the oversight process. She encouraged those present to consider this practice, noting that such involvement could become a standard approach during the current implementation phase. She concluded by saying this was an open invitation to begin building such habits now, without relying on future legislative changes. She acknowledged that while this may not yet be widespread, there is an opportunity to shape meaningful involvement and put mechanisms in place that support integration from within.

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Claudia SINGER-SMITH stressed the importance of identifying general strategies to secure cooperation between MRSs and cohesion policy programmes in the future. She noted that, particularly in the case of Interreg programmes, national coordinator (NC) teams have often played an active role in promoting this cooperation, especially by participating in monitoring committees. However, she acknowledged that this dynamic differs with ERDF and ESF+ programmes, where NCs are not necessarily involved in such structures. She observed that, within existing networks, there is awareness of the added value of macro-regional cooperation and a general willingness to engage. Nevertheless, she cautioned that willingness alone is sometimes not enough. Structural limitations and political sensitivities can restrict cross-sectoral and transnational collaboration. She explained that having formal provisions in place empowers civil servants to take action without resistance, whereas in the absence of such provisions, initiating cooperation requires significantly more effort and justification. To address this, Claudia SINGER-SMITH advocated for embedding these considerations in ongoing consultations, such as those connected to the Multi-Annual Financial Framework and stressed the need for top-down support to ensure MRSs are reflected in national and regional programming. She concluded that even where intentions are good, formalising the obligation increases the likelihood of meaningful implementation.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ then shared insights from the EUSAIR, where a dedicated governance support project has been developed to help embed MRS priorities within mainstream programmes, especially IPA III. He explained that their institution, the Directorate for DEI, is the lead partner for Work Package 5, which focuses on integrating the EUSAIR Action Plan into IPA III structures. This work will now extend into the Western Balkans Growth Fund and the Reform Agenda, based on recent agreements with DG REGIO and relevant managing authorities.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ highlighted that only 4% of IPA III funds go to Interreg programmes, with the remaining 96% used elsewhere a key reason for targeting mainstream programmes directly. Their technical assistance team has already carried out a comprehensive analysis of IPA documentation, comparing national and multi-country action plans against EUSAIR priorities, and developed guidance for both National IPA Coordinators and Steering Group members. While Interreg can efficiently support cross-border cooperation, its budget is small compared to what is available in the main IPA programmes. Upon request from the European Commission, they submitted the resulting documents and were encouraged to promote their work, though this remains a challenge due to the lack of a dedicated communications budget.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK acknowledged these efforts and commended that despite the lack of the legal basis the initiative to ensure that the IPA funding is also contributing to EUSAIR was taken.

Tatjana KRALJ (Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, HR) clarified that there is indeed a legal basis for cooperation within the EUSAIR framework through their project. This project currently encompasses three sub-projects involving different countries: Bosnia with Italy working on Work Package 5, Croatia on Work Package 2, and Italy on Work Package 3. She emphasised that the legal foundation for this is the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) acting as the lead project partner, marking a new development within EUSAIR where multiple projects now operate under a shared legal framework.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ added that within the same project, stakeholder engagement is handled by the Italian partner, who focuses on mainstream programmes in the member states, while DEI concentrates on embedding the Action Plan into IPA III. He noted that since the programming phase for IPA III is nearly complete, their efforts are now shifting to analysing the reform agendas of individual countries to continue the work.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH thanked the speakers for these clarifications and announced a transition from discussing funding matters to the next segment, which focuses on participatory governance, civil society, and the involvement of local actors.

Action 6: To foster cooperation built on mutual trust between state and non-state actors to enhance well-being for the inhabitant of the Danube Region

Marjana TIŠLER (PA 10/ CEP) gave an update on the current state of the Media Literacy Platform, clarifying at the outset that it is a project led by Jernej GRAHOR (PA 10/ CEP) (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 49-54**). The platform was developed in response to the rapidly evolving digital information landscape, which presents both opportunities and challenges. While digitalisation has made information more accessible and fostered stakeholder dialogue and participation, it has also led to information overload, misinformation, manipulation, and interference posing risks to democratic processes. One recent example was cited in Romania, where misinformation on TikTok influenced an election outcome, necessitating a repeat vote. Surveys from the Regional Cooperation Council and Eurobarometer confirm that fake news and disinformation are perceived as rising concerns, particularly in the Western Balkans. The platform aims to address this by supporting knowledge exchange and creating synergies among various stakeholders' media, the general public, academia, and more, fostering digital and critical thinking skills. She noted that the project has completed an initial outline and mapping of good practices across the region and a preliminary stakeholder list. Engagement with relevant initiatives is underway, including a meeting in Slovenia and consultations with other Priority Areas and MRSS. A stakeholder meeting is planned as a next step.

Fiona FAAS asked whether the platform is a physical platform.

Marjana TIŠLER clarified it is not, and interested stakeholders should contact the project team directly.

Teresa STUMMER enquired about which groups are already involved.

Marjana TIŠLER responded that the scope is broad and includes academia, but further details would need to be confirmed with Jernej.

Stefan LÜTGNAU asked about the methodology behind the mapping exercise.

Marjana TIŠLER again deferred to Jernej for specifics.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH noted that Jernej would be attending the SMILE project kick-off meeting, another DRP-funded project dealing with disinformation, where further opportunities for collaboration could be explored.

Action 7: To strengthen the involvement of civil society and local actors in the Danube Region

Stefan LÜTGNAU then introduced the topic of National Participation Days (NPD) (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 55-60**), explaining their role as foundational elements that support the Danube Participation Days (DPD). NPDs serve as forums for national-level dialogue, strengthening the link between state and non-state actors and enhancing the visibility and implementation of the Danube Strategy. The concept involves building a national network of informed civil society actors, academia, and local representatives to create a culture of dialogue, challenge, and policy input. He continued to provide an update on planned and recent NPDs: The 5th NPD in Ukraine is scheduled for 4 July in the Odessa region, under challenging conditions due to martial law. Last year's NPD saw around 50 in-person participants and hybrid attendance. Plans are under way for a 3rd NPD in Romania (Timisoara), a 4th in Moldova, and a potential revival in Stuttgart after COVID-19-related interruptions. There is strong interest in a 4th NPD in Bulgaria. The events are organised in national languages, making them more accessible, with recent examples including high-quality translation services that enabled international participation. The first NPD in Bosnia and Herzegovina was recently held and praised for its excellent organisation and venue, with hopes to boost attendance in future editions.

Stefan LÜTGNAU closed by encouraging stakeholders not to view NPDs as rigid formats but rather as part of a broader political and participatory culture that, if embraced, could unleash considerable untapped potential. He specifically highlighted previous discussions with Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ as an example of how related projects on civil society engagement could serve as a foundation for new NPDs, particularly in Montenegro.

Gabriella Katalin SOLYMOSI-DOBI shared an update on Hungary's recent National Participation Day (NPD), which took place in Budapest during the second half of last year. The event was held at the Centre for Contemporary Architecture and focused on the New European Bauhaus, addressing various aspects of its implementation. Several best practices were presented, including the Crypton House project, a multicultural experience centre using sensory methods. This initiative successfully raised awareness among both state and non-state actors attending the event. She confirmed that a follow-up event is planned for this year, although no specific date or topic has been determined yet.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH enquired about the timeline and themes for the upcoming event, and took the opportunity to remind participants of the importance of maintaining links between these events and national coordinators or steering group members. These connections ensure that civil society organisations

(CSOs) are engaged with the broader strategy. She emphasised that these events should not be isolated, but rather part of a continuous process of stakeholder engagement.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH informed participants about the upcoming Danube Participation Day reported (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 61-62**), co-organised by DCSF, PA10, the EUSDR Presidency, and LDA Mostar. The DPD will take place on 4 November 2025 in Sarajevo. The event will focus on the role of civil society and local actors in supporting EU enlargement, particularly how to ensure meaningful participation and engagement in transformation processes during accession. Furthermore, instead of a brainstorming session, Claudia SINGER-SMITH proposed to the SG consultations in June to gather input either jointly with D-LAP members or in a separate session for SG members.

A majority of SG members namely, Austria, Romania, Hungary, Croatia and Baden-Württemberg (Germany) preferred a separate session to allow for more structured input and space to present national initiatives. Claudia SINGER-SMITH then invited Marjana TIŠLER to present the upcoming Bled Strategic Forum.

Marjana TIŠLER provided an update on the upcoming 20th edition of the Bled Strategic Forum (BSF) (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 63-68**), one of the largest international conferences in South-Eastern and Central Europe, which also encompasses the Danube Region. The forum will be held in Bled, Slovenia, on 1–2 September 2025 under the theme “A Runaway World”. The BSF is an intergovernmental initiative co-organised by the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and the Centre for European Perspective (CEP). She emphasised the role of the Youth Bled Strategic Forum (YBSF), which precedes the main BSF and will take place on 29–30 August 2025 in Pokljuka, a location within the Slovenian national park. The theme of the YBSF this year is “What Values?”, tying into the broader BSF theme by exploring the intersection between values and world politics. She reflected on last year’s YBSF, themed “Restoring Common Ground”, which included roundtables, seminars, and workshops aimed at capacity building. Participants also had the opportunity to engage with foreign ministers and ambassadors. In 2024, 42 participants from 30 countries took part, including representatives from 11 Danube Strategy countries and one member of the Danube Youth Council (DYC). This year, plans include participation by two DYC members, with broader involvement from various stakeholders.

Tatjana KRALJ raised two questions: firstly, why only DYC representatives had been involved when Slovenia participates in three MRSS, and secondly, how participants are selected and invitations distributed. She noted that other MRSS, such as EUSAIR and potentially the Alpine Strategy, now also have youth councils.

Marjana TIŠLER responded that participation in the YBSF is open to all through a public call that remains open for one month. Two places are specifically reserved for DYC members, but no dedicated quotas have been allocated to representatives from other MRSS. The selection process focuses on quality and diversity of participants, rather than affiliation with particular strategies.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH added a technical clarification: funding for PA10’s involvement in YBSF comes from the Danube Region Programme (DRP), and this funding requires a clear reporting link to the EUSDR. Therefore, PA10’s role in the YBSF is framed more visibly within the context of the EUSDR. Although the BSF and YBSF have multiple funders and broader objectives, PA10’s contributions justify its prominence from a reporting and visibility perspective. This has also been discussed with Jernej, with the conclusion that EUSDR visibility is appropriate given the funding arrangement.

Márk ZSÁKAI expressed strong support for collaboration, drawing on his own experience as vice-president of a youth business group in Hungary. He noted that YBSF shares similar goals with other youth initiatives and that the two could be connected more closely. He highlighted the presence of 63 nationalities in 2024

and the participation of high-profile figures such as Kaja Kallas. He stressed the importance of continuing this work and asked if the YBSF was active on social media.

Marjana TIŠLER confirmed that YBSF has an Instagram account and recently launched a TikTok presence, while BSF is active on all major platforms.

András EDELÉNY underlined the importance of visibility and integrating youth perspectives into policymaking processes. He mentioned the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)'s recent launch of a "youth test" programme. Youth representatives are invited to study group meetings in a consultative (non-voting) role. He encouraged youth organisations to join this process and increase their presence in European affairs through such platforms.

Outcome:

PA10 will organise a separate online consultation for SG members ahead of the DPD.

Action 8: To enhance capacities of cities and municipalities to facilitate local and regional development

Claudia SINGER-SMITH opened the discussion on Action 8, focusing on capacity building in rural communities (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 69-70**), a topic initiated nearly a year ago. She explained that a policy and set of measures have been developed, and efforts are now underway to adopt a more strategic approach. She highlighted that rural development, particularly in the context of smart communities and smart villages, had first been addressed within the Alpine Strategy and subsequently extended to other MRSs. A cross-MRS network has since been established to help systematise efforts and identify ongoing initiatives and measures, especially those supporting participatory governance, community planning, and the use of digital tools. The key objectives outlined included mutual learning, policy development, and promoting the "right to stay" the idea of making rural areas more attractive in order to prevent depopulation. She also underlined the importance of supporting bottom-up approaches to EU enlargement.

A number of related activities have already taken place. Claudia SINGER-SMITH mentioned their participation in the Digital Alps Conference in Lienz, where the situation in the Alpine and Danube regions was discussed. A similar slot is expected at the upcoming MRS Week in Izola. Future plans include several capacity-building events and a call for small-scale smart community initiatives in 2026. She invited further input and examples of initiatives that contribute to local and rural development, particularly in the context of EU integration.

Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ presented a project that aligns with these goals, noting that it shares the principles of the BEST project (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 71-74**). He stated that once further information is available, it will be shared in future meetings. He identified key beneficiaries as the Ministry of Public Administration in Montenegro, the Union of Municipalities, and local self-government units. He briefly explained that the Union of Municipalities is a national association of municipalities and has been actively involved since the beginning of Montenegro's EU negotiation process. Their inclusion in negotiation chapter groups was the first step in integrating local actors. A second approach involved cross-border cooperation (CBC) programmes with neighbouring countries, allowing municipalities to participate actively. Training sessions and workshops were organised, and relevant data was collected from municipalities. He emphasised the strong interest from national authorities in applying for CBC funding. The project aims to strengthen the capacity of stakeholders involved in the EU integration and accession process.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK inquired whether the project was a government-led initiative or funded by an external programme.

Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ confirmed that it is fully financed by the European Investment Fund (EIF).

Tatjana KRALJ sought clarification on the term "local self-government units."

Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ explained that in the Montenegrin context, these units are departments within local government structures, although he acknowledged the complexity of the definition.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH thanked Miloš DAMJANOVIĆ and noted the project's relevance, suggesting potential alignment with the Interreg Europe project previously presented in Stuttgart. She then provided a brief update on the SMART ERA project. SMART ERA is a consortium of 25 organisations from 10 European countries, aiming to develop "smart innovation packages" (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 75-77**). These packages combine digital and non-technical tools, primarily in the area of participatory governance, to address local needs and improve quality of life in rural areas. Use cases range from food security and healthcare services in remote areas to digital infrastructure improvements and sustainable tourism. Pilot regions are located in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Trebinje), Bulgaria (Devetaki Plateau), Slovenia, Spain, Italy, and Finland. Claudia SINGER-SMITH noted that participants had received the SMART ERA analysis as part of their working documents (see **Annex VII. Item 6 SMART ERA Comparative study of MRS**), including a comparative study measuring the maturity of smart communities. These results were based on a survey conducted among thematic coordinators across MRSs.

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Within the EUSDR, Claudia SINGER-SMITH confirmed the existence of strategic projects focused on digital infrastructure and participatory governance with digital components. Many projects also involved civil society and local actors. She noted the need for more systematic support for capitalisation and strategic project identification, along with identifying gaps and overlooked areas. The SMART ERA project serves as a tool to promote and support the platform's broader policy development on rural development. She emphasised the growing relevance of rural development in the context of the new Multi-Annual Financial Framework. While many initiatives have been undertaken within agriculture, she warned that future agricultural funding may not address rural development to the same extent. She concluded by raising the question of how the future programming period will address these issues, suggesting this as a topic for continued discussion.

András EDELÉNY welcomed the project and study, noting their alignment with PA10's objectives. He asked if the work also addresses remote, peripheral, and mountainous regions.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH explained that while the Alpine Space focuses on mountainous areas, the Smart Communities approach is based more on functional areas—villages, clusters, or rural-urban relations—rather than geographic distinctions.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK asked who is involved in events like the Digital Alps Conference.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH replied that these involve representatives from thematic coordination groups across MRSs (e.g., AG5, Facility Point, PA10, Baltic Sea Innovation). Pilot regions also include civil society, local authorities, universities, businesses, and citizens. They are now exploring how to better involve other Priority Areas.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK emphasised the importance of defining the network clearly. While appreciating the effort, she suggested the initiative needs broader participation beyond a few strategic actors. She raised the idea of involving PA10 Steering Group members more actively.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH agreed and explained that the network is still taking shape. One of the next steps is linking with CAP and ENRD stakeholders. A capitalisation event is planned for 2026, including a call for smart community initiatives. She invited members to share suggestions for stakeholders and rural development initiatives to engage.

Fiona FAAS mentioned the Interreg DRP ELEVATE project, involving the CSO “ILEU” from Ulm working on digital solutions for elderly-friendly communities. She also recalled a relevant initiative presented in Stuttgart.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK added that a Central Europe targeted call funded 10–20 urban-rural projects that could be relevant. She suggested connecting with them for possible synergies.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH welcomed these ideas and proposed mapping relevant initiatives as a way to guide future capitalisation and strategy. She noted further discussion would follow, including input from the Danube Region Programme.

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Midhat DŽEMIĆ recommended the CHIAM Institute in Bari, Italy as a relevant stakeholder active in rural development in the Western Balkans.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK emphasised the value of connecting local rural initiatives to the macro-regional strategy and encouraged broader involvement from NGOs and umbrella organisations. She underlined the need to clarify who is part of the network and how it moves beyond single-country initiatives.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH agreed, noting the importance of defining clear stakeholder engagement and strategic focus. She acknowledged the rising interest in rural development and stressed the need for a platform to connect and advance initiatives collectively.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ supported this direction but reminded that macro-regional strategies should involve multiple countries, not just single-nation projects.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH closed by confirming this discussion is ongoing and that further engagement and clarity will follow.

Wrap up & organisational information

Item 7

Claudia SINGER-SMITH shared some organisational information with the Steering Group on the joint dinner and the second day of the meeting. She then closed the first day of the 28th Steering Group Meeting.

Thursday, 15 May 2025 | Day 2

Welcome Day 2 and outlook for the day

Item 8

Claudia SINGER-SMITH opened the meeting with a welcome and agenda overview, then handed over to Raphael SACHS (Danube Strategy Point) for updates.

Updates from the EU Danube Strategy

Item 9

Raphael SACHS (Danube Strategy Point) provided a strategic update on ongoing activities within the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), including support to the TRIO presidency, NC, PACs, and stakeholders (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 80-97**). He highlighted recent publications: the EUSDR implementation report and an external evaluation report, both accessible online. Key findings focused on political commitment, governance simplification, funding alignment with post-2027 EU cohesion policy, and enhancing steering group engagement. He also outlined planned capacity-building workshops for 2024 and 2025 targeting various stakeholders. Updates on the Danube Youth Council included membership changes and the upcoming camp in Vienna. He mentioned the upcoming redesign of the EUSDR website scheduled for June and ongoing governance developments, including the creation of thematic clusters and a governance task force. The selection of Danube Strategy flagships for 2025 was underway, with promotion and award ceremonies planned.

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Tatjana KRALJ inquired about task force participation;

Raphael SACHS confirmed opportunities for NCs, PACs, and SG members to engage, with more details to follow.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH noted further discussion on flagships would occur later.

EUSDR Flagship Projects - Voting

Item 10

Andreea PRASACU thanked those who submitted flagship projects. Information about this year's EUSDR PA10 Flagships was also presented (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 98**). The Steering Group engaged in a voting procedure.

Andreea PRASACU announced the Steering Group's voting results: the selected 2025 flagships are Cross-border Emergency Services, Danube Participation Day, and Caring Communities.

Outcome:

The PA 10 Steering Group voted on the EUSDR PA 10 Flagships for 2025: are Cross-border Emergency Services, Danube Participation Day, and Caring Communities

EUSDR Governance Task Force

Item 11

Claudia SINGER-SMITH opened the discussion on the governance task force, emphasising its purpose to enhance the governance structure of the EUSDR. With regards to the task force clusters, the chosen ones were focusing on clarifying and improving the roles of Steering Group members, strengthening stakeholder relations, and refining cooperation within the governance framework. Since many members of the Steering Group are also part of National Coordinators (NCs), she encouraged those members to actively participate in the task force cluster. She also invited feedback on what aspects should be addressed within the task

force, particularly regarding how the roles of Steering Group members can be better supported or strengthened.

Tatjana KRALJ reminded that Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, and Hungary had raised objections to the establishment of governance sub-groups, referencing earlier meeting minutes where their concerns were recorded.

Raphael SACHS acknowledged these concerns but explained that the task force clusters are intended as voluntary participation groups. Information regarding cluster involvement would be communicated to NCs and PACs, allowing interested parties to join without obligation.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH acknowledged the challenge posed by potentially short notice communications related to the task force activities and committed to keeping the Steering Group informed and engaged, seeking feedback wherever possible to ensure inclusivity.

Outcome:

PA 10 will share information regarding the governance task force as they will receive it.

Elevating the potential of strategic projects I

Item 12 & 13

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Fiona FAAS presented the project “Caring Communities”, co-financed by the DRP. She explained that the State Ministry itself is not directly involved in the project but shared the lead partner’s overview. The project follows up on the D-CARE labs initiative and focuses on community-centred care services in the Danube Region, particularly home care, using digital tools to improve service delivery (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 99-106**). The lead partner is Diakonie Baden, a key stakeholder in PA10, based in Karlsruhe.

The project addresses challenges such as aging populations, staff shortages, and low integration of digital support systems in care. It aims to scale and transfer innovative care solutions across the Danube region. Its three main pillars are capacity building (transformation), creating transnational networks and platforms (collaboration), and scientific support. It involves 25 partners from nine Danube region countries, including public bodies, NGOs, ministries, associations, and academia. She highlighted examples like the HILVER app, a matchmaking platform for everyday support, and the Perspective Care monitoring system that anonymously tracks patient movements and alerts nurses in case of incidents helping understaffed care facilities. She posed two questions to kickstart discussion: Are there similar European projects or strategies to network with? And how can such projects ensure sustainability and effective policy dialogue?

Teresa STUMMER mentioned the Health Across network in Lower Austria, noting existing projects on cross-border emergency health and digital health care that might connect well with Caring Communities. She also highlighted the new HECNET Interreg project cooperating with German regions and ongoing regional contract implementations between Austria, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH added that Health Across includes initiatives like Digi4Care that align with the project.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK offered to help by providing contacts and a list of relevant projects funded by Central Europe (CE) that complement the Danube Region Programme (DRP) projects, since CE avoids funding similar projects to the DRP.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH brought up another pilot project in the Smart Era initiative in Bulgaria's Devetaki Plateau, working on healthcare and digital tools, and mentioned the EUREGHA network as a possible resource. She asked whether care strategies typically involve stakeholder networks.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK said they had no knowledge on that but noted that the cross-border program between Romania and Hungary has heavily invested in cross-border health projects, supported by DG Regio research funding, though it's unclear how digital those are.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH offered to help gather more info from project partners about relevant geographic or thematic contacts and explore links to rural development initiatives where these projects could have broader impact.

Marjana TIŠLER introduced the SMF projects (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 107-113**), aiming to prepare initiatives for further funding. Last year, 36 projects were approved by the DRP committee, with four aligned to PA10:

- DevelopDataExchange: Builds institutional capacity and cooperation across the Danube Region to improve EU fund absorption, address gaps like poor collaboration, and coordinate stakeholders, aligned with data and digital goals.
- IMPACTful ACTIONS: Focuses on increasing youth participation in regional development and policy-making via mentoring, workshops, education programs, job shadowing, and peer learning across EU members and candidate countries.
- SCIHubs: Aims to boost innovation in disadvantaged areas through a smart cities' innovation hub. Activities include community consultations, entrepreneurial workshops, and creating a digital innovation catalogue, with plans for a work plan, analysis, and funding study.
- UPSCALE-DDS: Seeks socio-economic resilience and civic engagement enhancement in the Danube-Sava border regions through a transnational master plan, training, and improved EU fund use to connect isolated programs.

Marjana TIŠLER asked for interested stakeholders and shared contact info.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH explained SMF projects are early-stage and suggested an online meeting for presentations before the next SG meeting once more results emerge.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ noted that EURO-MED mission already covers much of this area with innovation hubs and project databases. DEI is a partner and advocates for EUSAIR. MD recommended linking with EURO-MED to avoid overlapping calls across transnational programs, especially referring to UPSCALE-DDS.

Fiona FAAS inquired about the IMPACTful ACTIONS project's geography, noting it could link to youth activities like those in DYON or specific regions.

Marjana TIŠLER replied it involves three countries near Slovenia but is meant for the whole Danube Region.

Midhat DŽEMIĆ added that EURO-MED is interested in expanding work into EUSDR themes like innovation, circular economy, and green transition, which are horizontal in EUSAIR but defined as Priority Areas in EUSDR.

Updates from the Danube Region Programme

Item 14

Claudia SINGER-SMITH shared updates from the Danube Region Programme (DRP) (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 114-116**) on behalf of Johannes Gabriel, currently at the Monitoring Committee meeting in Prague. Most decisions are made but final outcomes are pending. The second SMF call involved 30 projects; the database isn't updated yet, but information will be shared once available. Projects started in April 2025. They're discussing a possible project capitalisation event in Vienna to connect Danube Region projects with others. The third call will be targeted, with only some specific objectives open, likely running September to December. Around €4 million is available, expected to fund 1-2 projects for SO 4.2, depending on budget. Topics focus on local areas and cross-priority collaboration is possible. Final confirmation will be sought in two weeks.

Fiona FAAS noted from the German committee meeting that the third call will probably be one-step. Given limited funds for only 1-2 projects in SO 4.2, she suggested directly contacting stakeholders to manage expectations.

Outcome:

PA 10 will share more detailed information from the Danube Region Programme on the upcoming call when received.

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Outlook: Activities Priority Area 10 Coordination 2025

Item 15

Claudia SINGER-SMITH shared upcoming dates for this year (see **Annex IV. SGM_Overall PPNT, p. 117**): today's Steering Group meeting, Danube Participation Day (DPD) consultation soon, YBSF and BSF in early September, Mediterranean Week and MRS Week with the ESF network meeting, NC/PAC meeting in November alongside the Annual Forum and DPD, and the second Steering Group meeting in Prague, CZ. Organisationally, coordination between Slovenian and Austrian offices will alternate; the next meeting will be led by PAC 10/CEP and her team, so she advised the Steering Group to address questions to the colleagues from Slovenia.

Monika PAVLISOVÁ (Ministry of Regional Development, CZ) is looking forward to welcoming everyone at the 29th PA10 Steering Group Meeting in Prague.

Teresa STUMMER and Fiona FAAS shared that they will leave the PA 10 Steering Group. Claudia SINGER-SMITH thanked both members on behalf of the PA10 Steering Group for their great cooperation over the past years and wishes both members all the best for the future.

AoB & Closing of Meeting

Claudia SINGER-SMITH asks if there is any other business. The Steering Group members did not bring any other topics up for discussion.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH closes the 28th PA10 Steering Group Meeting.