



Participation Days Review 2014 – 2017

Preface: Reflecting on 4 years of Participation Days in the Danube Region

In 2017, the coordination of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation” (PA10) commissioned an external assessment that reviewed the 3 Danube Participation Days (DPD) held since 2014 as well as the 13 National Participation Days held in 8 out of 14 participating states of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) from 2014 to spring 2017.

The Participation Days are both lighthouse events of state and non-state actor cooperation and coordination and focal points for civil society and local actor participation in the EUSDR. The Danube Participation Days are – spatially as well as programmatically – closely connected to the EUSDR Annual Fora.

The Danube Participation Days have been developed by stakeholders of civil society and local actors, more specifically by the Danube Civil Society Forum, supported by EUSDR Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”. They were launched out of the growing concern over a lack of structural, transparent and regular participation of civil society and local actors in the EUSDR.¹

Since 2014, the Danube Participation Days are growing in terms of recognition, sustainability and participants, addressing a broad thematic scope while keeping the focus on the need for participation and cooperation. Thanks to the financial support from the Baden-Württemberg Foundation and the Foster Europe Foundation for strong European Regions, the organisation of national and Danube Participation Days is secured from 2016-2018.

As the national and macro-regional Participation Days are increasingly established in the Danube Region, Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation” and the Danube Civil Society Forum – together with their partners – seek to take stock of the achievements and potential for improvement. Thus, the assessment of Participation Days aimed at revealing the needs of stakeholders regarding cooperation and communication in the Danube Region.

In the review, the majority of participants (66%) confirmed that the Participation Days meet their needs and expectations. This is remarkable as the participants represent very different areas of activity, are mostly long standing EUSDR stakeholders (74%) and come from various backgrounds (civil society, local/regional authorities, academia, Priority Areas, etc.). This result clearly shows the need for a participative approach in the EUSDR that is both transversal and structural. The feedback also points at shortcomings and needs for a further development in the format of Participation Days in the EUSDR.

¹ Cf. Gábor Schneider/Stefan Lütgenau (2014): Tapping the full potential of Macro Regional Strategies Enhanced bottom-up participation and Multi-Level Governance in the Baltic and Danube Macro-Regional Strategies.



On the one hand, there is a demand for deepened and enlarged participation at the Participation Days (especially at national level) and for a stronger involvement of national (EUSDR National Coordinators, governments, parliaments, national agencies etc.) and supra-national actors (European Commission, international financial institutions, European Parliament). On the other hand, concrete information and support for cooperation, networking, project development and financing are deemed as insufficient in the Danube Region and are recommended to be further promoted. The need for capacity building was voiced several times, as well as the wish for more national workshops, more interaction in between the events as well as a better dissemination of information.

Better and intensified communication as well as interaction between Danube Participation Days and National Participation Days are essential to further the process of participation and create sustainable results. An even larger participation of NGOs as well as programs offering practical support would definitely enrich the Participation Days. However, larger events and structures need larger resources. One of the tasks of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is to include Civil Society and Local Actors in its implementation, and therefore it has to step up its efforts to provide the necessary resources.

The upcoming 4th Danube Participation Day in Budapest on 18 October at the Andrassy University will introduce the *Agenda for Participation in EU macro-regional strategies*. The Agenda for Participation aims at moving from project to process, to proceed from an event-oriented approach to an on-going cross-sectoral process overarching more than one macro-regional strategy. This new approach is very much in line with the essences of the demands expressed in the present assessment and will contribute to stronger cooperation and better communication beyond the Participation Days.

DI Rudolf Schicker

EUSDR Priority Area Coordinator 10
“Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”
City of Vienna





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1. Introduction

The Participation Days event format was established in 2014 by EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Priority Area 10 *Institutional Capacity and Cooperation* (PA10) and the Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF). It has resulted in numerous Danube and National Participation Days held in various countries of the Danube Region.

The Participation Days are embedded in the targets set by PA10, concretely in PA10's target to ensure that 80 % of partner countries involve national, regional and local authorities and civil society organizations through national hearings in cooperation with the EUSDR National Coordinators. In a larger context, this target is meant to contribute to "improve trust of citizens and stakeholders in political authorities", "establish a Danube Civil Society Forum", and "ensure sufficient information flow and exchange at all levels".² Information regarding the events has been summarized in a consolidated paper, which is available for download on the PA10 website.³

The Participation Days were reviewed in May 2017. An online questionnaire was publicized and promoted to the participants of past Participation Day events, as well as to various stakeholder groups. These included EUSDR stakeholders such as Priority Area Coordinators (PAC) and their Steering Groups (SG), National Coordinators (NC), members of the Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF), the Urban Platform Danube Region (UPDR), and the Danube Local Actors Platform (D-LAP), amongst others.

² For more information, see the Commission's [EUSDR Action Plan](#) and the [EUSDR Targets](#).

³ <https://www.danube-capacitycooperation.eu/participation-day>



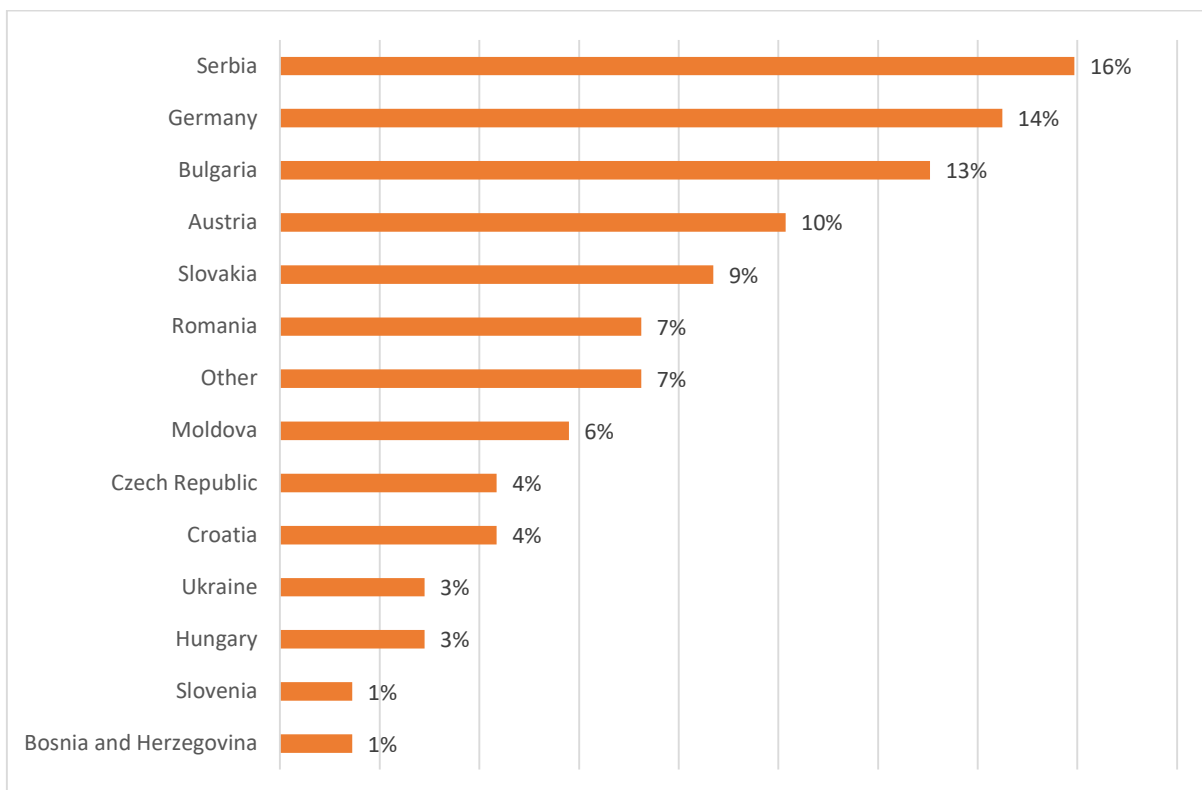
The purpose of the review was to collect input and feedback from the participants and other relevant stakeholders in order to better target future Participation Day events and adapt them to the existing needs and requirements.

The following evaluation of results is based on the 146 responses collected (“respondents”). 80 of the respondents confirmed that they had attended at least one Participation Day event (“participants”).

2. Review of past Participation Days

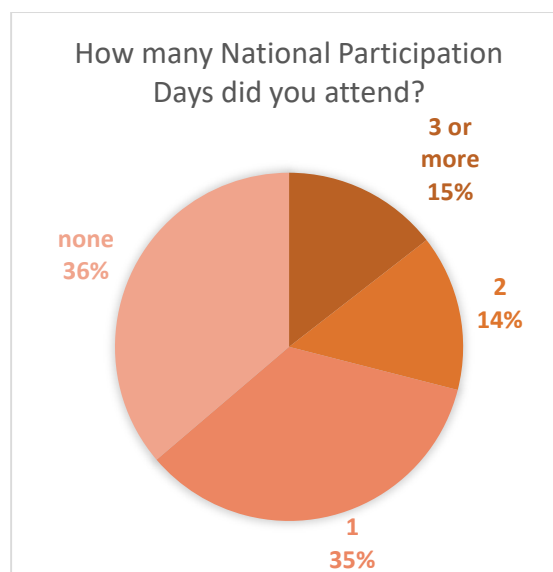
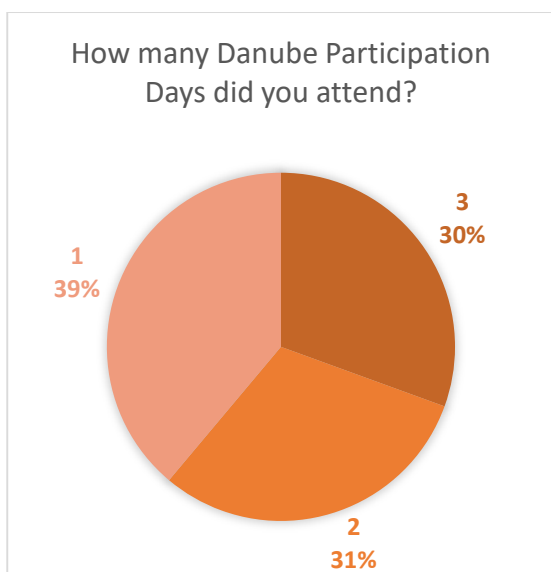
2.1 Participants

Representatives of organisations from the following countries participated in the various Danube or National Participation Day events:

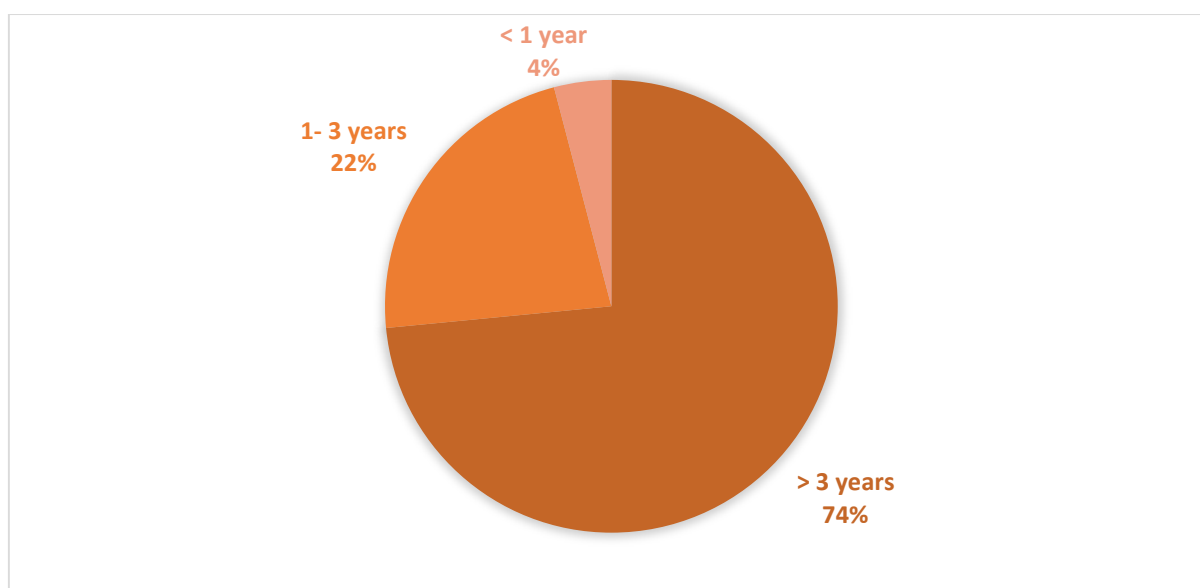


Most participants of the Danube or National Participation Day events consider themselves somehow connected to the EUSDR (58 %), mostly due to their affiliation with the PACs, their Steering or Working Groups, or owing to their membership in D-LAP or DCSF.

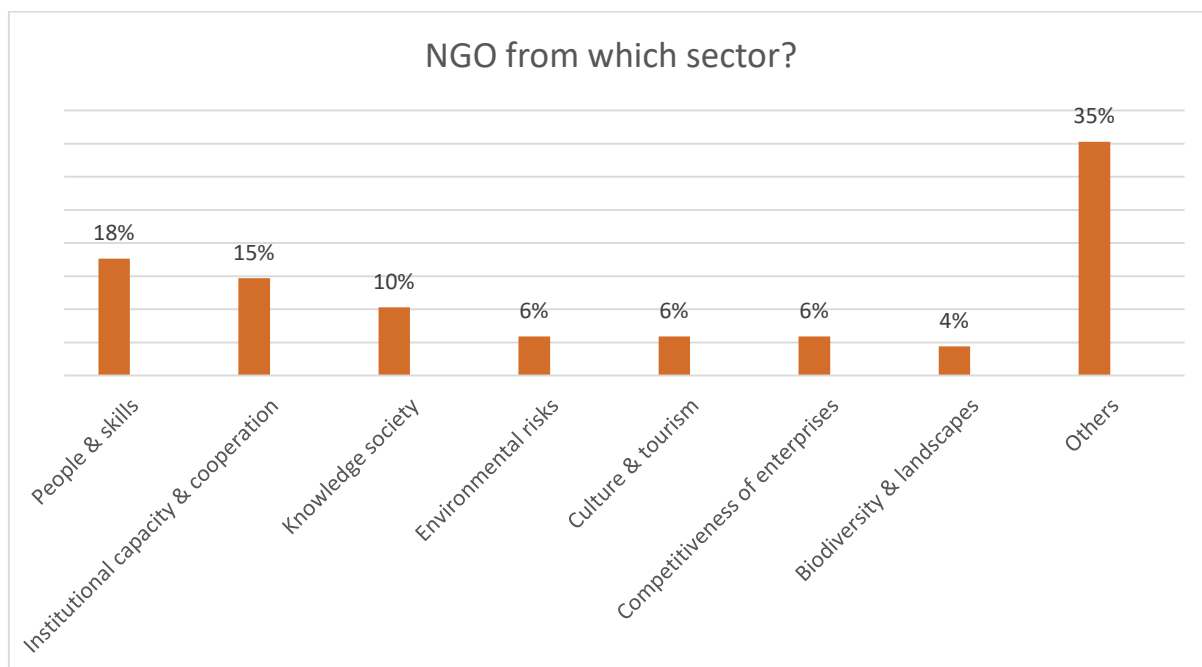
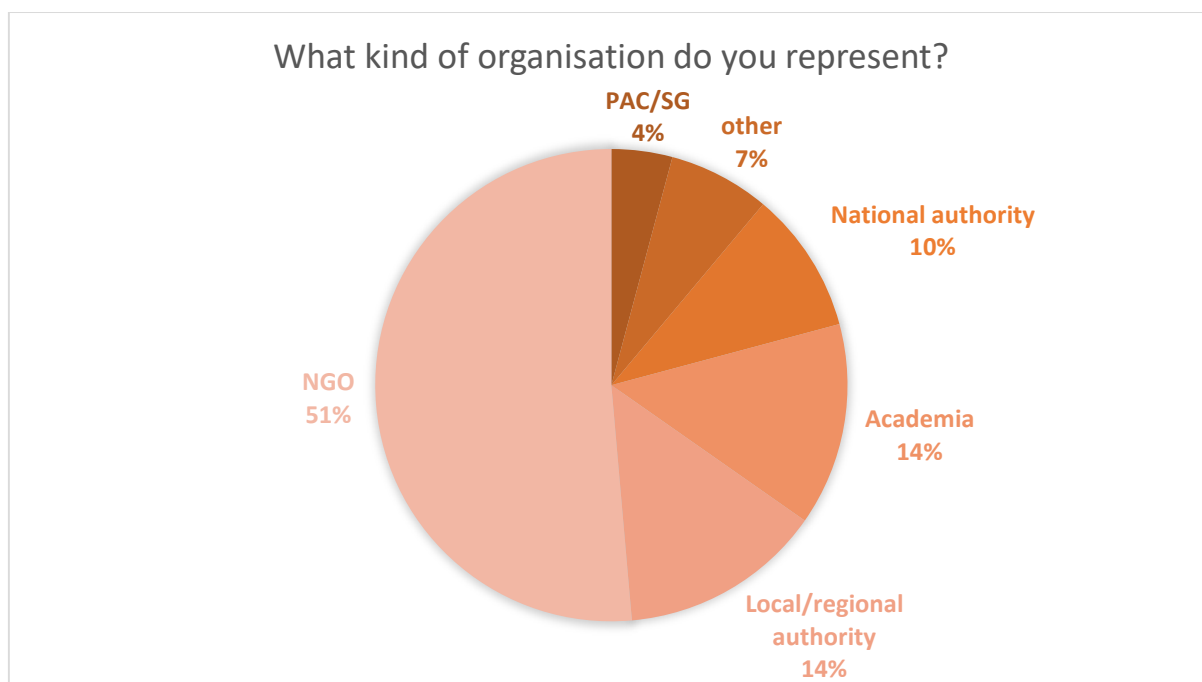
A considerable proportion of the participants had already attended more than one Danube Participation Day or more than one National Participation Day.



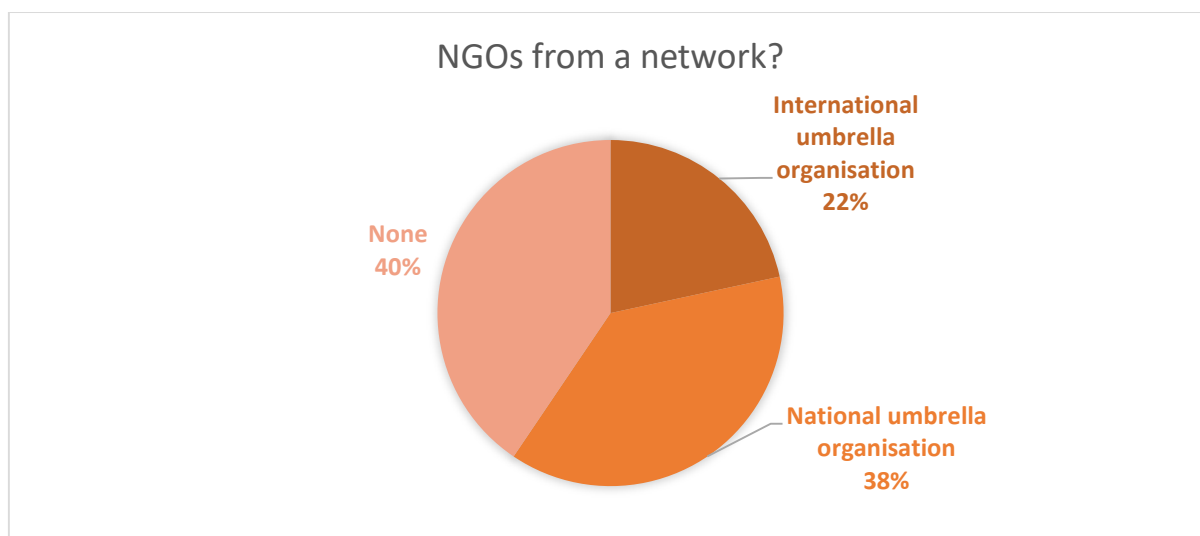
The overwhelming majority (74 %) of the participants that considered themselves connected to the EUSDR has been connected for more than 3 years.



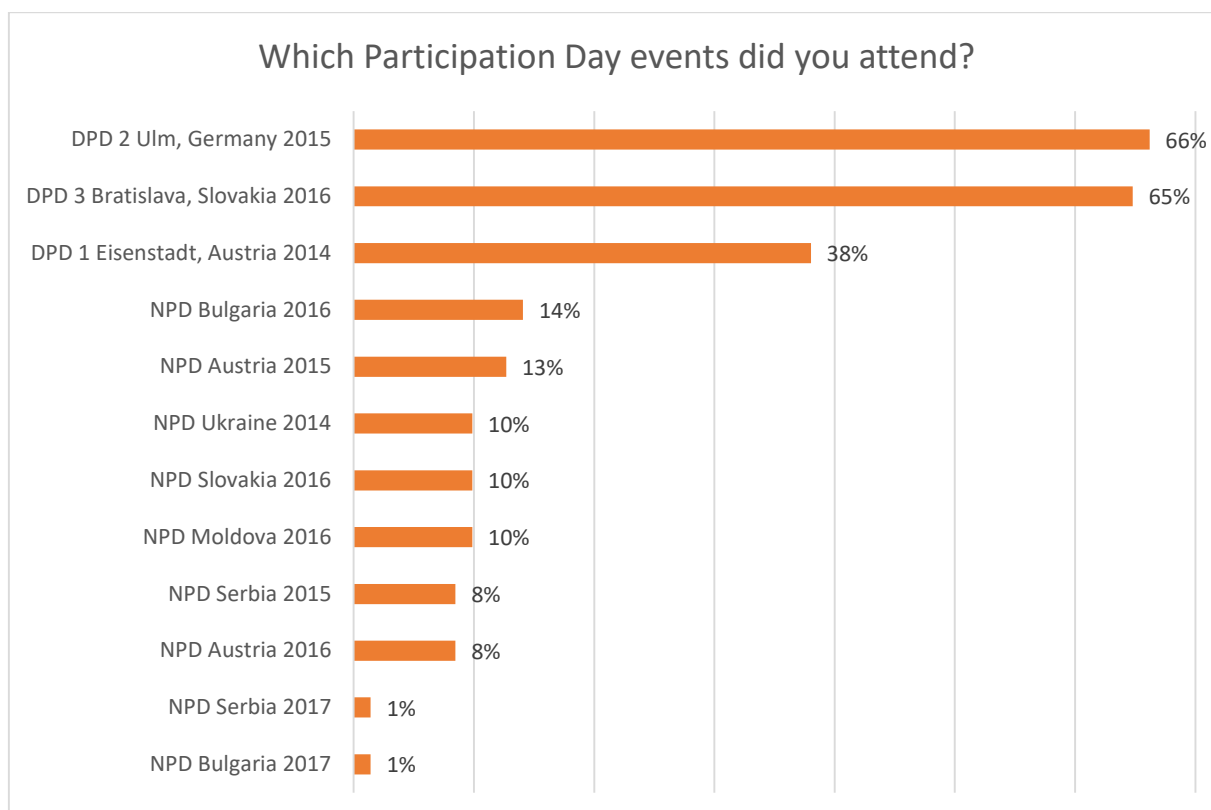
Participants came mostly from NGOs (51 %), followed by local or regional authorities (14 %), academia (14 %) and national authorities (10 %). The NGOs present at the Participation Day events covered a broad thematic spectrum: The sectors people and skills, institutional capacity & cooperation, and knowledge society were the most strongly represented sectors. Other represented sectors include environmental risk, culture and tourism, and competitiveness of enterprises, biodiversity and landscapes, social services, and child protection, just to name a few. A significant share of these NGOs (about 60 %) labelled themselves as international or national umbrella organisations.



The NGOs that labelled themselves as belonging to “other” sectors listed the following assignments: Sustainable energy, water quality, social services, child rights and minority rights (about 3 % each), security, migration and integration, animal welfare, humanitarian aid and development, and fire fighting, amongst others.



The respondents that did attend one or more Participation Day events frequently described their participation as “active” (e.g. presentation of a project): 32 % asserted this, while 60 % labelled their role as “regular participation”. The remaining 8 % found themselves in the roles of organisers or coordinators. Most of the respondents had participated in the 2nd and 3rd Danube Participation Day in Ulm and Bratislava respectively:

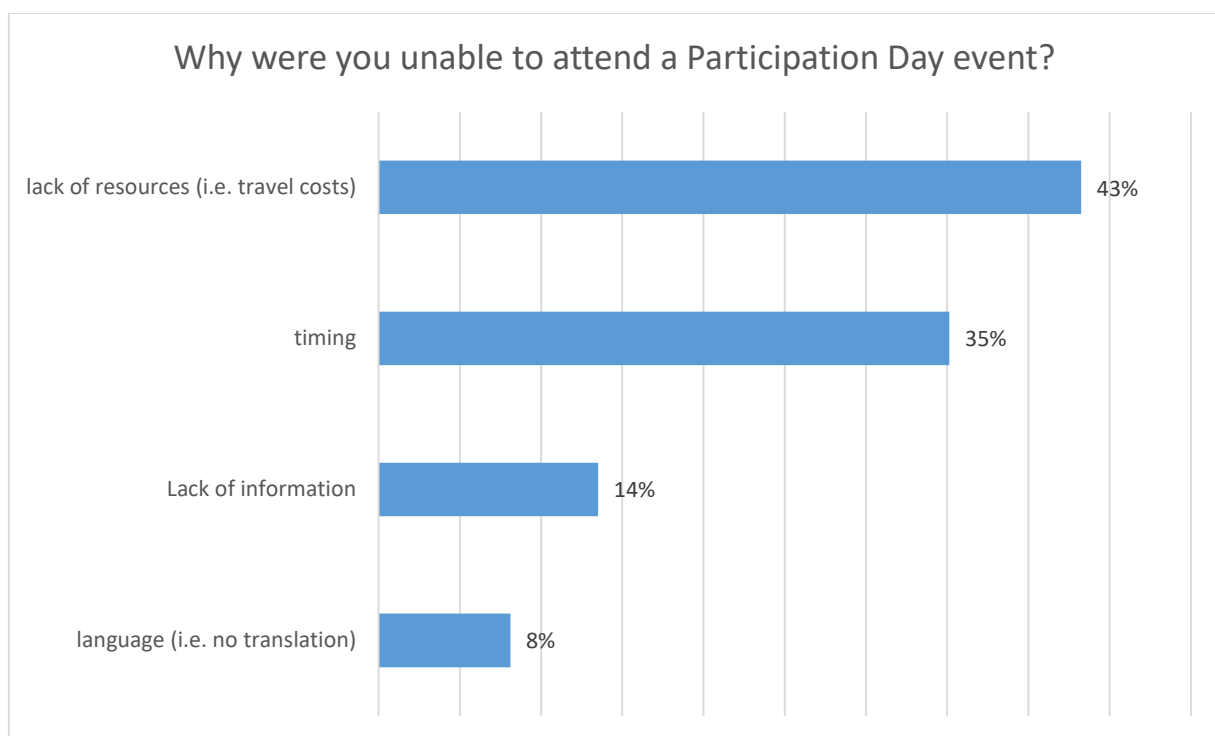


In addition to the listed Participation Day event, most Participation Day attendees (60 %) had also participated in an EUSDR Annual Forum.



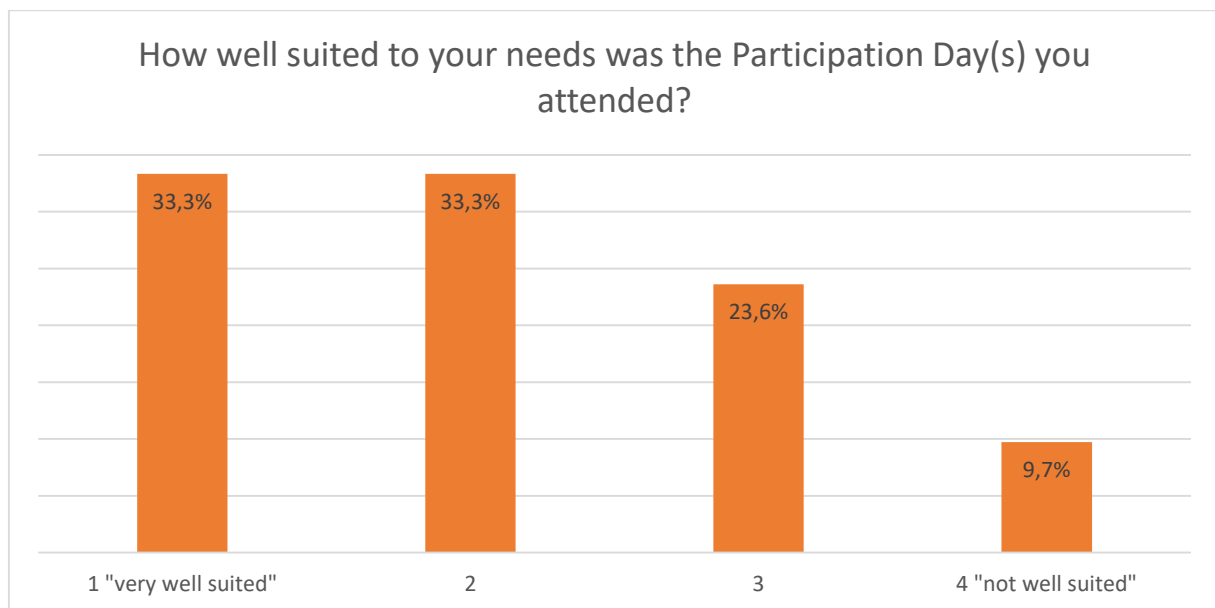
2.2 Obstacles

Some respondents stated that they had wished to attend a Participation Day event, but had been unable to do so for various reasons. The most frequently identified reason was a lack of resources (41 %), followed by unfortunate timing (38 %). Other reasons, such as translation services not being available, were perceived as much less of an obstacle. Some potential attendees stated that they had not been informed or that they did not receive an invitation on time.



2.3 Rating

The average rating that participants provided for the Participation Day events they attended amounts to 2,1 on a scale from 1 ("very well suited") to 4 ("not well suited"). A majority of 66 % of the participants was thus of the opinion that the Participation Day event they attended was very well or well suited to their needs.



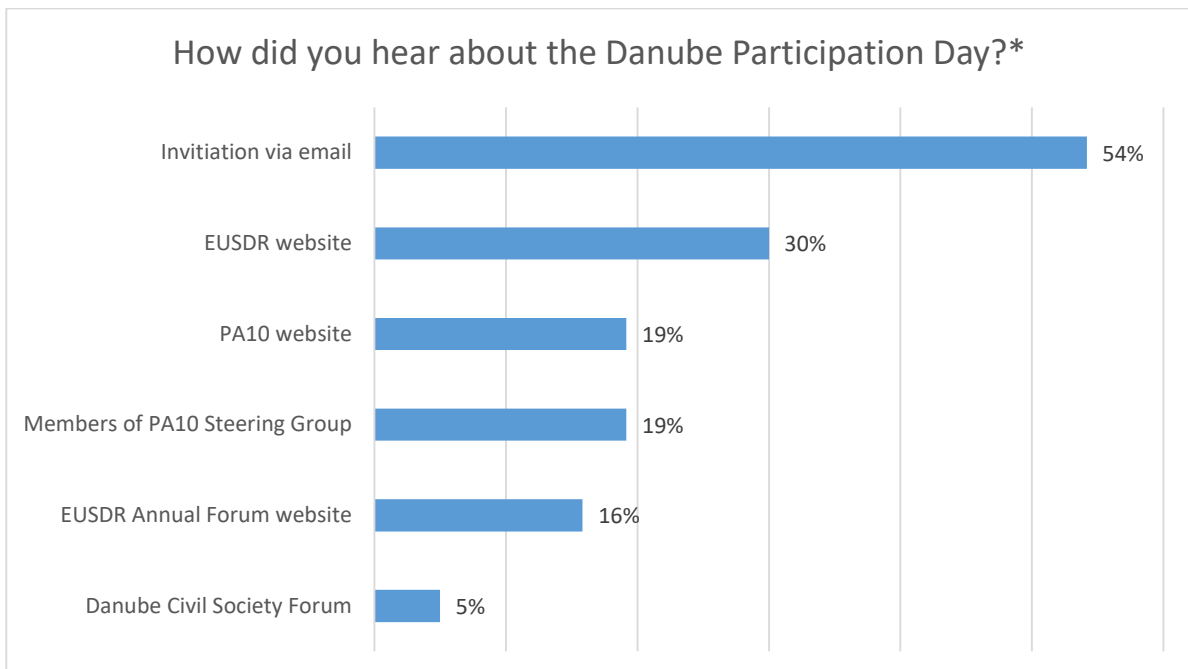
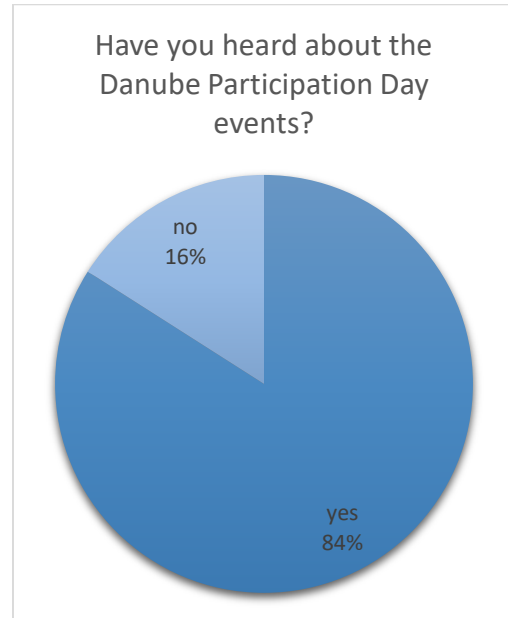
The participants were also asked how the Participation Days could be adapted to better match their needs. In response, more than half of the respondents agreed that more opportunities for exchange with other actors (61 %) and more best-practice examples (56 %) would be needed. Exactly half of the participants also named more room for hands-on project development as a need for future Participation Days. Another request included the participation of more high-level keynote speakers (17 %). Other input concerning the adaption of future Participation Day events included more time allocated to all EUSDR priorities, a more active involvement of national institutions, further usage of results by decision-makers and a focus on team building, leadership skills and better communication (each named only once).



2.4 Visibility

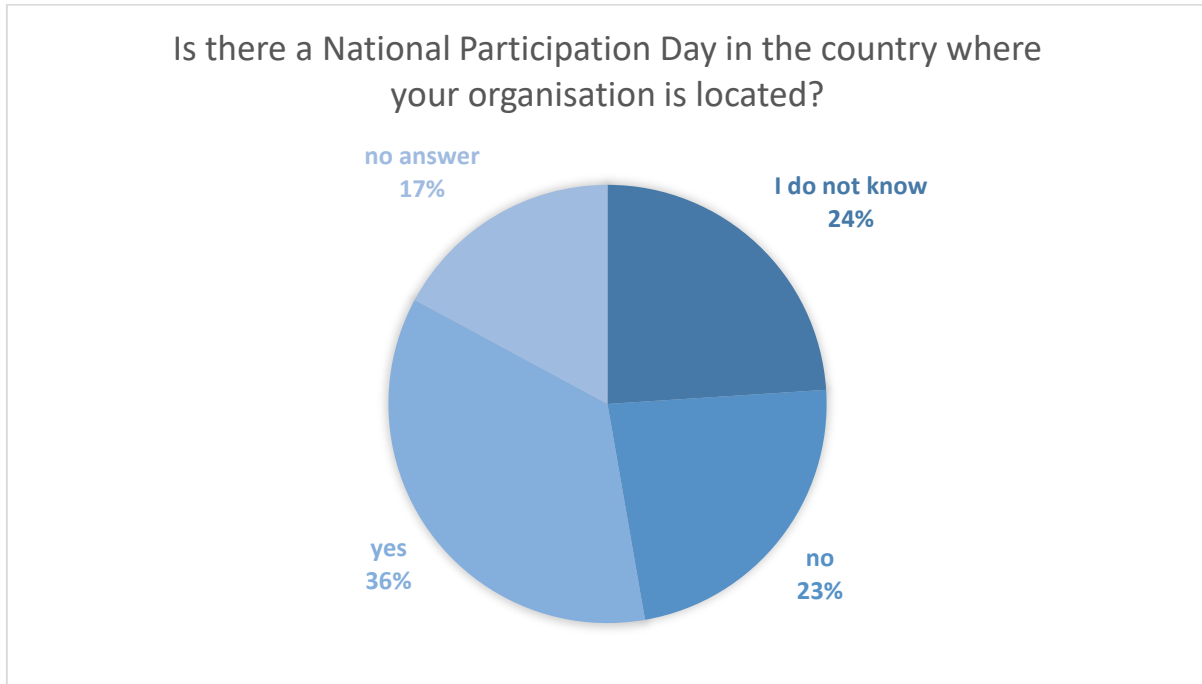
Amongst the respondents of the questionnaire, 16 % stated that they had not heard about the Danube Participation Day events before.

The respondents who had heard about it before, listed predominantly (54 %) information via email (i.e. being part of a mailing list) as their source of information. Other important channels of dissemination include the EUSDR website (30 %), the PA 10 website, and the respondents' membership within the PA10 Steering Group (19 % each). The website of the EUSDR Annual Forum was listed by 16 % of respondents. Other mentions include the Danube Civil Society Forum, the Civic Participation Forum Bulgaria, the LADDER project (Local Authorities as Drivers for Development Education and Raising awareness), D-LAP, and membership in other PA's Steering Groups.



* multiple answers possible

When asked whether there was a National Participation Day in their country of origin, a significant share of respondents recorded that they did not know (24 %) or provided no answer (17 %).



3. Needs and suggestions for future Participation Days

When asked to state their preference for the content-based orientation of future Participation Days, respondents clearly favoured a more practical approach for concrete project development over a strategic focus. On a scale from 1 (“strategic / political forums”) to 5 (“practical working groups”), responses amounted to an average rating of 3.8. More than 60 % of the respondents thus expressed their preference for a rather more practical orientation, as can be seen in the figure below.



Respondents' inputs regarding the better implementation of EUSDR targets and actions also included open feedback. The following needs and wished for future Participation Days⁴ were mentioned:

- Improved **communication** strategy, more publicity and better information flow informing about the Participation Day events
- Stronger focus on practical working groups offering **concrete support for project development**, including tools for partner search and funding opportunities
- Stronger Focus on fostering **dialogue** and networking amongst participants, also in between Participation Day events.
- More **participatory** approach for the composition and set-up of future Participation Day events
- Fostering participation at national level to ensure **political commitment**
- **Considering a thematic focus** of Participation Day events

⁴ This question does not differentiate between Danube Participation Days and National Participation Days.



- Supporting more participation of **NGOs and Civil Society** in the Participation Day events
- Considering a clearer definition and communication of the **aim of Participation Day events**
- Further support capacity building for project development

Additionally, the respondents provided some feedback and suggestions directed at the general implementation of the EUSDR. The feedback mainly addressed the following topics:

- Focus on fostering **ownership** of the EUSDR amongst participants to promote increased responsibility for the Strategy's outcomes, i.e. by supporting project initiatives
- Improved **communication** strategy, publicity, information flow and visibility to include and involve all relevant actors in the Participation Day events, to address new players and to support closer interaction with the public
- Focus on fostering **political commitment** by taking steps to further include and involve the national level
- More **financial support** for projects and dedicated funds

A more detailed list of the respondents' inputs is attached to the present review (see Annex).

4. Conclusion

Overall, the Participation Day events are well received among the respondents. As intended, most participants of the past Participation Days represented NGOs from various sectors. While most attendees assert that the events are well matched to their needs, a majority of them see the future of the Participation Days rather as practical working groups than as strategic fora. The respondents specifically stress the need to improve communication of the Participation Day events, while focussing on fostering dialogue and increased ownership by developing future Participation Day events in a participatory manner.



Annex: Additional feedback

The following additional feedback was provided by the respondents of the Participation Day questionnaire regarding their needs and wishes:

1. Related to the Participation Days

- More dialogue with all participants
- More information
- Balanced participation of all PAs
- Less politics
- Diversification of Participation Days attendance
- More practical working groups
- Broad civil society participation
- More room for best-practice exchange (in plenum)
- Use Participation Days to raise awareness of EUSDR opportunities
- More regular contact between Participation Day events
- More clearly defined aim of Participation Days (connect players in the field -> more space where this can happen; strategic -> people that are able to take decisions are present)
- Smaller strategy gathering before or after the Participation Day
- More participatory instead of a classical keynote event with some workshops -> an alternative tool which could be used is the Art of Hosting (participatory leadership)
- Less governmental organisations
- More publicity for Participation Days
- More regard for NGO participation
- Focus on minorities (e.g. Roma)
- More resources allocated to organise Participation Days and follow up activities for NGOs
- Should be seen as a continuous process, with follow up activities for each EUSDR priority

2. Related to the implementation of the EUSDR

2.1 Communication

- Extremely active communication strategy
- Easy language
- More useful information about the main objectives of the EUSDR and the existing projects
- More interaction with public
- Practical opportunity for new players to join
- More communication between the actors in the different countries
- More focused information days, for example focused only on one priority area with presentations of projects
- More communication between Annual Forums
- Better presence in the media to spread the idea more widely
- More involvement of the public
- Better responsiveness on behalf of the institutions towards the issues raised by citizens and civic organizations
- More information about EUSDR spread at national and at local level



- Closer cooperation, more direct contacts and exchange activities to be better informed
- Visibility and sharing information
- To involve people directly first to discussion to define problems and then in real actions to achieve targets and aims
- Make EUSDR targets and actions more popular among different groups
- Better and more intensive communication of stakeholders, improved coordination and local focus ("field work")
- Exchanges and learning from each other (Priority Area Coordinators, Steering Group Members, Working Groups, project leaders) e.g. via regular meetings organized by the future Danube Strategy Point, but also during National Participation Days

2.2 Financing

- More financing for project implementation
- Grant schemes
- Specific EUSDR financial tool for international projects in the area of education
- More tailored financial instruments
- More opportunities to apply for research grants in the strategic areas of EUSDR
- Concrete support for the realization of applicable projects, support in finding adequate (and experienced) project partners, and offering opportunities for matching potential partners
- More financing specifically for NGOs within the Danube Transnational Programme
- Practical tools for project generation and financing
- More money in the Danube Transnational Programme
- Better focused calls for projects in accordance with the EUSDR priority areas and a better financial support for these projects
- Financial coverage of the EUSDR initiatives (national/international)
- Dedicated funds
- Better alignment of resources and actors
- Financial support also for smaller projects (continuation of the Technical Assistance Facility TAF-DRP and other funds)

2.3 Governance

- More involvement of key actors
- Closer connection to official representatives of the countries
- System support of governments and respective ministries from the region
- National leader who once in a while gathers EUSDR participants for short brain storming session. This will be a constant reminder and emotional support capable of keeping people focused on the implementation and achievement of the goals of EUSDR.
- Reach more and different groups of people for their feedback at a national level
- More and adequate action by member state
- Strengthen and empower the networks that were formed in the context of the EUSDR
- Growing institutionalisation of the Strategy
- Efficient involvement of local public and sectoral authorities through attraction of best practices in different domains of environmental management and on this base to develop project proposals
- Stronger Priority Area Coordinators



- Targets better focused and specified to achieve greater political support
- More ownership by the partner countries
- Better reach out to the implementers
- Better connections between Danube regions in view of horizontal and vertical principles of the EUSDR
- Better and faster exchange of ideas and information for different conditions in the Upper, Middle and Lower Danube regions
- Stronger capacities
- Cross-sectoral planning
- More transparency in the EUSDR
- Political commitment, capable administrations and good transnational coordination
- Better transnational and trans-sectorial networking in the region
- Closer cooperation and better coordination between the political level and the grass-roots level (civil society and business community) without which the EUSDR is facing the risk of remaining just a political declaration
- More practical involvement of stakeholders in particular actions
- More structured and strategic civil society involvement in planning and decision making
- dedicated political leadership
- Involvement of the developing agencies of the Danube countries
- Greater political commitment and support
- better cooperation in different levels of governance, better cooperation / information transfer among different priority areas
- More participatory approach among all stakeholders

2.4 Other

- Participation Days not as separate events, but an integral part of the Annual Forums where national coordinators, researchers, NGOs, etc. can participate and discuss joint actions (not separate for NGOs!). The example of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification could be followed, where NGOs present their position during Conferences of Parties while all delegates participate.
- Clear definition of a "EUSDR project"; a comprehensive collection of all EUSDR projects (including successes and failures) in order to show what's being implemented already
- More projects implemented by NGOs
- A sense of responsibility for the EUSDR's outcomes, on a political as well as civil society level -> project initiatives give stakeholders a sense of ownership
- Semi-structured discussion with the Commission about the current actions and targets fulfilment
- Sessions with independent external experts focused on strategic setting - getting a proper feedback and advices on our work, strongly focused on improvement of our outcomes
- Effective usage of running Danube Transnational Programme projects via capitalisation strategy
- Increase both participatory experiments and strategic (more than political) forums
- Feedback for the implementation of EUSDR, challenges and recommendations for improvement
- More networking, more action, partnerships and people
- Training and information of all administrative levels, especially the local level, also with regard to citizen participation
- More national workshops