



## **Activities of the 2021 Slovak Presidency in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**



MINISTRY

OF INVESTMENTS, REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
AND INFORMATIZATION  
OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC



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## **EUSDR: Current Challenges**

The European Commission, in its second report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies of January 2019 (Commission report)<sup>1</sup>, states that the challenges of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region continue to include the decline in political support as well as the unsatisfactory level of participation in the meetings of the Steering groups of the Priority areas and the insufficient use of mainstream programmes to fund the Strategy. In its third report of September 2020<sup>2</sup>, the Commission states that strengthening political commitment is essential: the national and regional authorities should be able to provide more strategic leadership at ministerial level to bridge the gap between the strong political commitments and the ability of administrations to follow up on these. Therefore, the Slovak Presidency intends to address the following topics:

### **Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan - Implementation Phase**

In 2018, a revision of the EUSDR Action Plan was launched on the basis of a decision of the Danube Strategy Member States and the European Commission, as it never underwent a revision since the beginning of the implementation of the Strategy. The result of the updated Action Plan should deliver a boost for the Danube Region Strategy. The activities and objectives of the Strategy have been updated to make a better interlinkage between them. There should also be a better link with Cohesion policy, the strategic priorities at European level such as the European Green Deal and the European Digital Agenda and a more efficient use of European Union funds.

The government of Slovak republic approved a National Position to the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan by Resolution 332/2019, where the priorities of Slovakia in individual areas of the Danube strategy were defined. These priorities were subsequently applied in the comments to the revision proposal. The new Action Plan entered into force on 6 April 2020 as a Commission Staff Working Document.

### **Political commitment of countries - ownership**

From the very beginning of the preparation and implementation of the Danube Strategy, it was assumed by the European Commission that the main responsibility for the implementation and overall enforcement of the Strategy (so-called ownership) should be taken over by the Partner States themselves. The reality is that performance in this regard varies from country to country. Political and governance structures in Partner States should take the initiative to start processes leading to a much more effective, efficient and visible implementation of the Strategy.

### **Incorporation of the Danube Strategy into EU funds**

When aligning the Strategy with the priorities of EU funding programmes (so-called Embedding), the aim is to provide EU funds to the objectives of the Danube Strategy, especially from the point of view of the preparation of the 2021-2027 programming period. At present,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0021>

<sup>2</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0578&from=EN>

the Danube Transnational Programme is the main contributor to Danube Strategy projects, but according to the draft EU regulations for the forthcoming programming period, it is necessary for all Cohesion Policy programmes including European Territorial Cooperation programmes, national and regional operational programmes to make a greater contribution to the Danube Strategy. Therefore, the EUSDR objectives and actions need to be embedded into the Partnership Agreements and 2021–2027 European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), programmes and equivalent instruments for non-EU countries. The Embedding process needs to be pursued on national and regional levels, with strong guidance and support of the European Commission (DG REGIO). Additional efforts are needed to ensure the Embedding process also involving the relevant programming authorities. A monitoring of the process at national and regional levels will be as much necessary as a committed support of the European Commission to monitor and support the implementation process on macro-regional level.

The draft Regulation on European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) contains several measures to strengthen Interreg programmes covering the same functional areas as existing macroregional strategies (MRS) and to increase the coherence between funding and MRS priorities. One example is the introduction of thematic concentration (EUSDR Embedding-term “Strategic topics”) requirements for Interreg programmes that support a macro-regional strategy, which stipulate that such programmes must allocate a minimum percentage of their ERDF resources to the related strategy (70% or 100%) depending on the type of cooperation. The ETC draft Regulation also obliges Member States to allocate at least 15% of their ERDF resources to one of two new Interreg-specific objectives, one of which, better governance of Interreg programmes, includes actions to strengthen the institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders to implement a MRS.

## **Governance - Danube Region Strategy Management**

There are long-term shortcomings in Danube Strategy governance. Not all countries approach all Priority Areas with the same effort and commitment. Priority Area Coordinators often report high fluctuation of state representatives and the repeated absence of some participating states in Steering Group meetings, which makes decision-making significantly more difficult. Also the third report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies states that more attention should be given to staff continuity and providing adequate administrative support.

As a result of the frequent staff fluctuation, several measures have already been taken to support capacity building for stakeholders of the Strategy. This will continue to be accomplished through further seminars and publications on issues crucial to the implementation of EUSDR (aimed at regional and national stakeholders).

The above topics also correspond with the third Commission report and the Annex and the conclusions of the EU General Affairs Council from May 2019<sup>3</sup> on EU macro-regional strategies, in which the Council recognises the role of macro-regions in fostering socio-economic and territorial cohesion and calls on the participating states to strengthen the ownership and ensure adequate political support at national level as well as to strengthen key implementers by providing adequate administrative capacity and increasing political support in order to: ensure the fulfilment of their tasks and active participation in their steering groups.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9895-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

## **Priorities of Slovakia during the Presidency**

In 2021 (November 2020 to October 2021), Slovakia will hold the Presidency of the EUSDR. The main role of the country holding the Presidency is to drive forward the implementation of EUSDR, ensuring the continuity of the agenda and secures cooperation among EUSDR member states. The Presidency provides guidance, leadership and support to the Danube Region. The Presidency sets political and thematic priorities and fosters joint actions. The presiding state convenes and organises meetings of National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators of the Strategy (2-3 per year), coordinates the preparation of meeting documents and in particular organises the Annual Forum of the EUSDR as the main professional and political event, usually in autumn, where the Presidency is also handed over to the next Presidency state. The Presidency is supported by the Danube Strategy Point.

Two to three meetings of National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators are expected. The Slovak Presidency currently expects the following topics for the meeting: 1. Follow-up to the Revision of the EUSDR Action plan; 2. Focus on making better use of EU funds (Embedding); 3. Involvement of various actors in the implementation of the Strategy; 4. Participation of non-EU countries in the Strategy; 5. Issues related to migration and climate change. Although Slovakia does not anticipate that the Danube Strategy should play a special role in mitigating the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, EUSDR member states' efforts can be expected to focus in this direction as well due to the nature of the Strategy being a cooperation platform to support coordinated actions that have a much needed effects for the Danube region.

The most important and challenging event associated with the Presidency is the organisation of the EUSDR 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum. Each Presidency is focused on some key topics, which are then translated into the priorities of the Annual Forum. We suggest that the Slovak Presidency focuses on the following topics:

### **Institutional:**

#### **A. Institutional Cooperation of Stakeholders involved in Implementation**

Fostering stronger cooperation between the actors of the Danube Strategy, on one hand, and other entities, such as the EU institutions, international organizations, research institutions, non-governmental organizations, etc. to advocate the added value of macro-regional cooperation, on the other hand. Promoting such cooperation will increase visibility and awareness about the Danube Region Strategy (internal and external communication).

#### **B. Cooperation among EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators**

Experience has shown that cooperation between Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) needs to be intensified, especially within the four pillars of the EUSDR, as many issues cross sectoral boundaries of a single Priority Area (cross-cutting issues).

## **Thematic:**

### **C. Climate Change and the Protection of Biodiversity**

From Slovakia's point of view, these are the two key challenges with a wide cross-sectoral overlap. These problems require broad and committed cooperation among the various actors in the Danube region, both vertically and horizontally. The topic of climate change is also one of the key initiatives of the European Commission, which focuses on a new strategy for green growth, the so-called European Green Deal.

### **D. Digitization and Innovation Ecosystems**

The world economy is undergoing constant change. Increasing technological progress is modifying the demand for products and services and changing production processes as well as the structure of the labour market. Digitalization is also the second key initiative of the European Commission going hand in hand with the EGD, the so called twin transformation, green and digital. In order for the countries of the Danube region to be able to respond effectively to these changes, it is necessary to have a functional innovation environment that supports not only innovative products but also innovators. Therefore, it is important to set the rules and incentives of the participating states so as to support the innovative capacity of the countries and the region, as well as the cooperation of actors across the whole region.

## **Other Activities of the Slovak Presidency in the EUSDR**

In addition to the above activities, which are directly related to the implementation of the Danube Strategy (meetings of national coordinators, annual forum, etc.), we propose to organise thematic conferences or small-scale workshops (approximately 50-60 participants), which will focus on some of the Presidency's topics.

### **Planned thematic conferences (workshops)**

#### **Climate change: Challenge or opportunity of a post-pandemic era?**

The event would focus on the issues of development or restart of economic and social life in the countries of the Danube region after the COVID-19 pandemic. The event would be organized in cooperation with the coordinators of the relevant Priority areas and the European Commission.

Another event should be a conference focusing on digitization and innovations and related issues.

In preparation for the EUSDR 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Forum, we would also like to organize workshops or conferences on two institutional topics that we want to include in the Annual Forum - Institutional cooperation of stakeholders involved in Strategy implementation and Cooperation among Priority Area Coordinators.

### **Task Force on Embedding (TF-EMB)**

The TF-EMB will continue to operate. The incorporation of the Danube strategy into EU funds is a key prerequisite for the success of macro-regional strategies. The number and schedule of meetings will depend on the agreement among the partners.

**Network of MA in the EUSDR**

Further focus shall be placed on the networks of national and regional managing authorities responsible for ESI and IPA/NDICI funds. Apart to the EUSDR ESF Network an EDRF Network shall be established. Both networks shall support the process of establishing a process in each EUSDR member state where national and regional authorities responsible for ESI and IPA/NDICI funds intend to coordinate their 2021-2027 programming to support the implementation of the Strategy. Such networks could also consider coordination and monitoring of the implementation of macro-regional actions (and projects) included in operational programmes (OPs). Additional monitoring tools could be further discussed and, if feasible, jointly developed with DSP.

**Network of MRS Presidencies**

Meetings of chairpersons of the National Coordination groups (TRIO presidencies of the macro-regional strategies – 4 TRIO Presidencies) and the European Commission are considered a further important exchange and cooperation tool for an effective cross MRS dialogue. The Slovak EUSDR Presidency supports this forum and is ready to offer to host next meeting(s).

**A week of macro-regional strategies and a meeting of the High-Level Group**

Similar to 2020, in 2021, if the situation allows, a Week of Macro-Regional Strategies will physically take place (End of February / Beginning of March), where a number of events will take place, usually organized by the Presidencies of the four macro-regional strategies. A High-Level Group meeting for macro-regional strategies will also take place during this week. A week of macro-regional strategies is likely to take place in Brussels.