

# 26th Meeting of the Steering Group of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation” of the EUSDR (PA10)

## - Minutes -

24-25 April, 2024 | University for Continuing Education Krems | Doktor-Karl-Dorrek-Straße 30, 3500 Krems and der Donau

### Main Outcomes

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

### Participants:

8 out of 14 EUSDR countries were represented at the 26<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Steering Group of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation” (see **Annex 2. Participants list**). Hence, the quorum was reached. The following countries were represented: AT, CZ, DE (Baden-Württemberg), HR, HU, ME, SI, and SK.

Furthermore, the European Commission (DG REGIO), the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), The Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism (AT), The Department for International and European Affairs (Lower Austria) and The Danube Civil Society Forum (AT) participated.

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### Main outcomes of the discussion:

- The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the updates of the Austrian Presidency.
- The PA10 Steering Group agreed that PA10 Coordination Team will reach out to steering group Members with regards to positions related to Cohesion Policy post-2027.
- PA10 Coordination Team will add the `paper` version of the PA10 Newcome Compass more prominently into presentations/interactive guide.
- The PA10 Steering Group agreed that PA10 Coordination Team will send out questions to steering groups members to gather information on digitalisation needs.
- The PA10 Steering Group notes current policies.
- The Steering group notes the importance of National Participation Days.
- The Steering group notes the changes in the Danube Youth Council.
- The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the updates related the Bled Strategic Forum and the Young Bled Strategic Forum.
- The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the EUSDR Danube Participation Day on 19 June 2024.
- The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the EUSDR Annual Forum from 20-21 June 2024.
- The PA 10 Steering Group took note on organising extended Steering Group meeting on the following topics:

- Involving local communities, stakeholders in Smart Communities initiative
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the upcoming Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days in Brussels.
- The PA10 Steering Group agreed on documenting reasons for non-attending members.
- The PA 10 Steering Group voted on the EUSDR PA 10 Flagships for 2024.
- The PA10 Steering Group voted to amend RoP regarding hybrid meetings.
- The PA10 Steering group notes that further inquiry to address further topics is important for advancing cross-border healthcare in the Danube Region.

#### Upcoming events:

12-13 June 2024	EU Macro-Regional and Seas Basin Strategies Days (BE)
19 June 2024	Danube Participation Day (AT)
20-21 June 2024	EUSDR Annual Forum (AT)
30 August - 01 September 2024	Young Bled Strategic Forum (SI)
2-3 September 2024	Bled Strategic Forum (SI)

Wednesday, 24 April 2024 | Day 1

## Welcome

Claudia SINGER-SMITH (PAC 10/City of Vienna) and Jernej GRAHOR (PAC 10/Centre for European Perspective) welcomed all participants to the 26<sup>th</sup> EUSDR PA 10 Steering Group Meeting. Claudia Singer welcomes Simon ORTNER, Head of Department for International and European Affairs, Lower Austria.

Simon ORTNER from the Department for International and European Affairs, Lower Austria welcomed attendees to the PA10 meeting in Krems, Austria, hosted during Austria's EUSDR presidency. He highlighted the long-standing cooperation network in the Danube region, consisting of 40 members across 12 European countries. They collaborate in various areas such as science, technology, culture, education, economy, and health. Lower Austria is pleased to contribute its expertise to the PA10 Steering group, with a focus on improving cross-border healthcare cooperation. Simon regretted not being able to stay for the entire meeting but wished for fruitful discussions. He thanked the PA10 Team for organizing the meeting, the University of Continuing Education for providing the venue, and Teresa STUMMER, Department for International and European Affairs, Lower Austria for her assistance.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH expressed gratitude for the warm welcome and praised the longstanding cooperation with Lower Austria. They appreciated Lower Austria's leadership in cross-border emergency healthcare. She welcomed everyone to the meeting, acknowledging both past achievements and the need to discuss and decide on future progress for the strategy as well as Priority Area 10. She highlighted European and macroregional developments, including planning for cohesion policy post-2027, and emphasised the importance of aligning strategies with representatives' views from the Danube region. She then passed the floor to Jernej GRAHOR.

Jernej GRAHOR welcomed all participants and expressed the multitude of topics addressed by the Priority Area 10, as well as looking forward to the discussions ahead.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH invited all participants to introduce themselves in a brief *tour de table*.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH state the presence of a quorum and that the Hungarian representatives will join the meeting later on the day. She then presents the agenda for the 26th Steering Group Meeting of PA 10 (see **Annex 1. Agenda**). The agenda was adopted by the Steering Group.

## Cohesion Policy Post 2027

## Item 1

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK (Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy) states that a general framework of the preparation within DG REGIO of the Cohesion Policy was already shared and that Member States are encouraged to consult their stakeholders and share the outcomes of any debates they may hold with them with the DG Regio (see **Annex 3. PPNT DG REGIO**). Furthermore, a request for consultations with Interreg programmes is essential due to the transnational design of this specific community. Additionally, it was proposed that reflection sessions will be organised on how stakeholders envision the future of macroregional strategies within future cohesion policy. JASINKA-MÜHLECK points towards Roland ARBTER (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism) who will represent the outcome and approach of the Danube region, providing insights into the Austrian presidency's progress and the Danube region's perspective. Discussing recommendations from a high-level group, JASINSKA-MÜHLECK clarified that although the report was commissioned by the European Commission it is not the Commission's official opinion, however it still offers valuable insights for future policy making. The recommendations mentioned covered several key areas such as:

- **Maintaining Focus on Sustainable Development:** The cohesion policy should continue its original focus on driving sustainable development in regions and reducing economic disparities.
- **Promoting a Place-Based Approach:** JASINSKA-MÜHLECK stated that for a more localized approach, where regions assess their unique assets, challenges, and opportunities to develop tailored responses. This approach would lead to a more differentiated cohesion policy.
- **Strengthening National and Regional Institutions:** There was an emphasis on enhancing institutions and capacity-building at both national and regional levels, alongside investments, to ensure effective implementation of cohesion policy.
- **Improving Efficiency of Territorial Instruments:** Here the need to enhance the effectiveness of territorial instruments and development strategies is highlighted, ensuring also that they translate into tangible outcomes rather than existing merely on paper.
- **Facilitating Global Opportunities for Enterprises:** It is important to connect regions with global opportunities, particularly in light of disruptions like the conflict in Ukraine. Facilitating cooperation between SMEs and sources of knowledge across regions was emphasized.
- **Enhancing Governance and Stakeholder Involvement:** JASINSKA-MÜHLECK stressed the importance of involving stakeholders throughout the decision-making process, making it a fundamental aspect of modern cohesion policy.
- **Becoming More Performance-Based:** There was a call for a shift towards a more performance-based approach, where the effectiveness of policy measures is measured by their impact on regional transformation.

- Simplifying Administrative Processes: Simplifying administrative procedures at all levels was suggested to reduce complexity and improve policy implementation efficiency.
- Building Synergies with Other Policies: Recognizing the interconnected nature of policies, particularly the need to coordinate with initiatives like the green transition, was highlighted.

Additionally, the report emphasised the role of cohesion policy in supporting EU member state enlargement, underscoring its vital importance in facilitating development in newer member states.

Furthermore, the reference document produced by colleagues in DG Regio, outlining the impact of cohesion policy on economic, social, and territorial cohesion is briefly discussed. The report indicates that cohesion policy has contributed to convergence within the EU, with notable improvements in GDP and unemployment rates in member states that joined since 2004. However, it's noted that the policy's impact varies across regions, with capital regions benefiting more significantly. Challenges such as the green transition and demographic changes exacerbate existing disparities, particularly affecting regions in Eastern Europe, Southern Italy, Northern France and Greece. To address these issues, there's a call for changes in cohesion policy, emphasising a developmental focus, simplicity, and cost-effectiveness. The importance of investment accompanied by structural reforms is highlighted, along with the need to address administrative and institutional shortcomings. Flexibility within the policy framework is also emphasised, while preserving key aspects of the policy such as the placed-based approach, partnership, and multilevel governance.

Roland ARBTER (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism AT) discussed the significance of the current year for the future debate on cohesion policy, acknowledging its linkage with budgetary and political issues. Rather than immediately formulating a joint position paper, they proposed dedicating time during National Coordinators (NCs) and Priority Area Coordinators (PAC) meetings to delve into these topics. Additionally, he suggested allocating time at the annual forum for discussions on future perspectives and cooperation in the Danube Region. The aim is to better understand and address challenges faced by the region, identifying areas for cooperation and the necessary framework conditions. Roland ARBTER emphasised the importance of raising awareness about the specific challenges in the Danube Region, such as geopolitical context, demographic changes, and institutional capacity. He then highlighted the significance of the enlargement dimension and the mixing of funds, stressing the need for further progress in these areas. To support these efforts, he mentioned investing in consultants and organising sessions at various forums, including the Macroregional Meetings in Brussels. He encouraged PA10 to contribute to these discussions, leveraging their strengths and expertise. Finally, he emphasised the importance of developing ideas and options to facilitate an open debate, rather than pursuing an official position paper at the moment.

Tatjana KRALJ (Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds) suggested presenting macro-regional strategies, including the Adriatic and Ionian, due to their similarities.

Roland ARBTER expressed openness to cross macro-regional cooperation and highlighted the preparation for a joint meeting with all strategies to inform each other and explore opportunities for collaboration.

Katharina LENZ (Danube Strategy Point) shared experiences of participating in a consultation process for post-2027. Thereby emphasizing that macro-regional strategies should contribute more to the process as to avoid confusion between programmes and macro-regional strategies.

Stefan LÜTGNAU (Danube Civil Society Forum) speculated on reasons why some regions perform below average in working with cohesion policy, suggesting it could be related to decentralization and civil society capacity. Proposing then involving civil society in discussions and addressing capacity building and governance expertise.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH highlighted the multifaceted factors contributing to the challenges faced by regions in implementing cohesion policy, including not only decentralization but also lacking capacities. They mentioned the paradox where cohesion policy works better in regions with existing capacities and struggles in regions lacking them.

Roland ARBTER added that declining populations in some Danube Region countries further exacerbate the issue of diminishing capacities, prompting the need for reorganisation.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH raised a question regarding the openness of public institutions towards civil society organisations and local actors, particularly in regions with highly centralised constitutional setups. They wondered how this would be reflected in discussions.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK responded by stating that while the Commission sets the tone with proposals, national proposals build upon arguments from consultations. However, decentralization is not the objective; rather, the aim is to design cohesion policy closer to regional needs, allowing decisions to be made strategically and integrated. She emphasized the importance of investing in areas that align with regional needs and build upon each other for development.

Tatjana KRALJ announced a conference in cooperation with the Committee of Regions on May 14th in Šibenik, inviting counties from the Adriatic and Ionian Region as well as Managing Authorities from all programs across Europe to discuss future needs and conclusions for further agreements. She then sought clarification on the enhanced linkage with reforms mentioned earlier.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK explained that the enhanced linkage with reforms is inspired by the approach taken in national plans for recovery, where investments and reforms are closely related. For example, if the goal is to improve the employability of women, changes in laws may be necessary alongside investments in facilities like kindergartens, reinforcing each other to achieve the objective. These reforms are specifically chosen to ensure that investments lead to the desired development outcomes at the strategic level, although negotiating these aspects requires significant resources.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH summarized the key points, noting that there may be exploration of ideas for cohesion policy and macro-regional strategies post-2027. The Annual Forum will provide an opportunity for further discussion on these topics, and they proposed reaching out in advance to gather any positions PA10 may have to contribute to discussions. Additionally, there may be discussions on Danube Participation Day.

#### Outcomes:

The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the updates of the Austrian Presidency.

PA10 Coordination Team will reach out to steering group Members with regards to positions related to Cohesion Policy post-2027.

## Priority Area 10 Beginners' Guide

## Item 2

Andreea PRASACU (Priority Area 10) presented the interactive PA10 Newcome Compass to the Steering Group, allowing participants to access the guide on their mobile devices and follow a walk-through, as well as answer a quiz (see **Annex 4. PPNT PA10 VIE**).

Roland ARBTER inquired if the tool was publicly accessible.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH explained that the tool was initially designed to provide a structured welcome package for new members, including those from working groups and conferences. It is open-source and aims to attract more stakeholders.

Tijana DOKOVIC-VAHOVIC (Ministry of European Affairs ME) emphasized its usefulness but noted changes in Montenegro's institutions and ministries and that an updated list of the responsables has been sent to DSP

Fiona FAAS suggested passing on the idea to other PACs and NCs as it will help national coordination to approach line ministries that do not yet have nominated any steering group members.

Katharina LENZ mentioned discussing the guide as a good practice example at the last NC/PAC meeting and proposed its use for the entire EUSDR and its publication on the EUSDR website.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH mentioned plans to start using the guide after the SG meeting and make it accessible to all.

Monika PAVLISOVA (Ministry of Regional Development CZ) preferred the paper version but appreciated the interactive aspect.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK inquired about the tool's static nature, asking if it includes recent activities.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH clarified that recent activities would be discussed in bilateral discussions with Steering Group members, while the guide provides an overview and general understanding of the workings of PA10.

Teresa STUMMER asked about accessing the paper version, and Claudia SINGER-SMITH noted it was not currently available but could be added prominently in the future.

### Outcomes:

PA10 Coordination Team will add the `paper` version of the PA10 Newcome Compass more prominently into presentations/interactive guide.

## Progressing Institutional Capacity and Cooperation in the Danube Region

## Item 3

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

Claudia SINGER-SMITH led a discussion on advancing e-governance within the Danube Region, drawing on European policies like enhancing the European administrative space and the digital decade (see **Annex 5. PPNT PA10 VIE 2**). Concrete examples of initiatives to promote e-governance were shared, including

Serbia's offer for mutual learning activities and initiatives by NALAS focusing on digitalisation at the sub-national level.

Participants, including Fiona FAAS and Tijana DOKOVIC-VAHOVIC, contributed insights into e-governance projects and strategies in their respective regions. Fiona FAAS highlighted digitalisation initiatives in BaWü, such as funding competitions for municipalities and digital courtrooms, while Tijana provided details on Montenegro's project focusing on e-services and digital infrastructure in response to COVID-19. Tijana also referenced a project under IPA II supporting the development of digital public administration platforms and e-government services for citizens and businesses in Montenegro.

Katharina LENZ introduced a valuable tool developed by Interact, [cooperationactions.eu/region](https://cooperationactions.eu/region), which provides a comprehensive list of regions and programs related to e-governance, facilitating coordinated actions and collaboration efforts.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH requested further information from participants on e-governance initiatives, particularly regarding regional development strategies and programs mentioned in your text. She emphasised the importance of understanding the current situation and potential areas for cooperation before planning further discussions or meetings. Additionally, she expressed their willingness to receive feedback on the situation in participants' countries or regions and explore opportunities for collaboration.

Stefan LÜTGNAU highlighted the digital dimension of municipality development in Ukraine, particularly in regions like Odessa, which have undergone significant rebuilding and transition during and after periods of conflict.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH acknowledged this input and expressed interest in receiving feedback from members in Ukraine, as well as from other regions. Additionally, she suggested to gather more information on digitalisation needs and to approach NALAS and their working group in digitalisation for further insights. The Steering Group members agreed to also received further inquiries with relation to digitalisation topics.

#### Outcomes:

The PA10 Steering Group agreed that PA10 Coordination Team will send out questions to steering groups members to gather information on digitalisation needs.

The PA10 Steering Group notes current policies.

#### **Action 4: To support better coordination of funding**

Claudia SINGER-SMITH elaborated on the ESF+ Network of Managing Authorities in the Danube Region, a collaborative initiative jointly undertaken with Priority Area 9 `People and Skills` and Priority Area 10 `Institutional Capacities and Cooperation` (see **Annex 5. PPNT PA10 VIE 2**). This network serves to address the challenge of transnational cooperation within ESF+ programs, which traditionally lack dedicated mechanisms for such collaboration. Unlike ERDF programs, ESF+ programs are typically

organized at the national or regional level, making it difficult to facilitate cooperation across borders. Thus, the network's primary objective is to bridge this gap and promote collaboration among Managing Authorities (MAs) responsible for ESF+ programs in the Danube Region.

She continues to provides a status-quo of the network and stated that the network operates by bringing together MAs from various countries to identify common areas of interest and joint topics for collaboration. This process begins with defining shared themes and identifying areas where cooperation can be mutually beneficial. It then moves on to sharing best practices and exploring different models of cooperation to enhance the effectiveness of ESF+ programs. Furthermore, a significant aspect of the network's work involves preparing candidate countries for full membership by familiarizing them with the functioning of ESF+ programs and facilitating their integration into transnational cooperation efforts. To this end, the network conducted an inception meeting on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2024, which saw the participation of colleagues from Montenegro and Serbia. The network plans to further engage with colleagues from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova to expand its reach and foster collaboration on social affairs components of ESF+ programs.

Furthermore, Claudia SINGER-SMITH states that the network has identified several priority topics for joint cooperation, including women's participation in the labour market, digitalisation, vocational training, social entrepreneurship, inclusion of vulnerable groups, aging population issues, lifelong learning, and social innovation. Moving forward, the network aims to address two main challenges: political buy-in for cross-border partnerships and the technical implementation of collaborative projects. Overcoming these challenges will require concerted efforts to demonstrate the added value of transnational cooperation and streamline implementation processes. Looking ahead, the network plans to convene its next meeting in September, with Croatia hosting the event. Key topics for discussion at this meeting will include vocational training, social innovation, and labour market inclusion. The network also intends to explore options for including external partners in collaborative projects to further enhance their impact and reach.

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Finally, to immediate collaboration efforts, the network is also looking towards the future of ESF+ programs post-2027. Discussions on this topic will focus on sharing insights and experiences to inform policy development and identify common priorities, such as the need for simplification and streamlining of ESF+ programs.

Katharine LENZ highlighted the challenge faced by institutions in coordinating programs, including ESF, particularly regarding co-financing. While there is enthusiasm for collaboration, securing and justifying co-financing within ministries remains a hurdle. However, national coordinators are swift in providing contacts to facilitate collaboration if needed.

Katarina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK inquired about the extent of collaboration within the network, particularly regarding the sharing of best practices and capitalisation. She wondered if discussions extended to joint funding initiatives across multiple countries and if there was interest in such endeavours.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH responded by emphasising the need to assess the similarities in actions before considering joint initiatives. Past discussions and experiences have shown some reluctance among



managing authorities due to the complexities involved in joint funding initiatives. While managing authorities are open to innovative approaches, concerns about compliance and coordination with multiple actors often hinder progress. She also pointed out the necessity of allowing room for experimentation and learning from failure to foster innovation.

Katharina LENZ echoed similar concerns, emphasizing the challenges of justifying the allocation of funds from one region to another and the coordination required to align national procedures with joint actions. While thematic coverage is not an issue, coordinating calls, managing applications, and engaging stakeholders present significant hurdles.

Karolina JASISKA-MÜHLECK acknowledged these concerns and clarified that joint calls do not necessarily entail financial commitments from partners in other regions. Each program can cover its own costs within a joint call framework.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH expressed interest in exploring why it's challenging to convince managing authorities to engage in joint funding initiatives despite their willingness. While there is a desire for collaboration, finding viable pathways forward remains a key consideration.

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

Jernej GRAHOR commences presentation on the media literacy platform stating and opened the discussion by highlighting the digital environment in which it operates, emphasizing the interconnected nature of digital opportunities and the pervasive influence of social media (see **Annex 6. PPNT CEP**). He noted the challenges posed by the rapid pace of digital innovation, which necessitates continuous learning and adaptation to stay abreast of initiatives. Concerns were raised about disinformation and misinformation, particularly in the context of global elections, underscoring the importance of promoting critical thinking and building a resilient society. Jernej GRAHOR stressed the need for collaboration across various stakeholders, including institutions, civil society, academia, and the private sector, to address these challenges effectively.

He further stated that the main objective of the Media Literacy Platform is to enhance capacities within the Danube Strategy and other Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS) and regions. A screening was conducted to identify stakeholders working on the topic, considering their diverse viewpoints, sectors, and nationalities. The intention is to foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders through community-building efforts. He then proceeded to a brainstorming session to generate ideas on media literacy, with participants grouped into pairs to explore different perspectives.

The brainstorming session yielded insightful ideas, including considerations on security aspects, social media regulation, the role of education in media literacy, and combating fake news. Suggestions ranged from enhancing education for teachers and students to addressing the role of responsible media in countering disinformation. Concerns were raised about the impact of social media algorithms on information consumption and the need for greater regulation in this area.

Jernej GRAHOR finally concluded the session by highlighting the importance of proactive and reactive approaches to addressing disinformation, emphasizing the need for ongoing communication efforts and platform developments.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH shared information about a recently completed project called the MELIA Observatory, which focused on media literacy and developed educational materials for secondary schools and universities. Additionally, an AI tool was created to detect hate speech, showcasing ongoing efforts to address digital challenges.

She then transitioned to the topic of National Participation Days highlighting their importance as an integral part of the Danube Strategy's engagement with civil society and giving the floor to Stefan LÜTGENAU to elaborate.

Stefan LÜTGENAU elaborated on the evolution of National Participation Days, explaining that they emerged as an extension of the Danube Participation Days to ensure more frequent and accessible opportunities for engagement. The goal was to facilitate dialogue between civil society, local authorities, national ministries, and agencies on issues relevant to the EUSDR within each country. He also emphasised that the aim of National Participation Days is not nationalistic but rather inclusive of all stakeholders with an interest in the EUSDR. Over the years, at least 22 National Participation Days have been organized in 10-14 countries, with positive responses from participants. These events serve as a crucial pillar of the strategy, providing a platform for civil society to contribute to discussions on the strategy's direction, programming periods, and partnership agreements. Despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, National Participation Days have continued to facilitate open debates and discussions, helping to shape the strategy's approach in various countries. The ongoing engagement of civil society remains essential for ensuring the effectiveness and relevance of the EUSDR. He then addressed the 3rd National Participation Day in Austria, held three weeks ago, which marked an experimental approach compared to previous editions. While these events typically focus on discussing the overarching goals and synergies between state and non-state actors within the Danube Strategy, this edition took a more targeted approach. Specifically, it addressed the pressing issue of water management in the face of climate change for the mid-future, looking ahead to 2024. This theme encompassed various facets of water management, including considerations related to hydropower, navigation, drinking water, and tourism. Further on, he mentioned the upcoming National Participation Day in Ukraine which will build upon the groundwork laid during the Danube Participation Day in Ljubljana last year. However, the focus will be on Ukraine specifically, reflecting the need to align civil society positions with local stakeholders in Ukraine.

Gabriela Katalin SOLIMOSI-DOBI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs HU) continued by giving insights into the National Participation Day organised in Hungary this year in March which had the main focus of on addressing the challenge of retaining populations in rural areas and combating the issue of brain drain. This theme was proposed by the Danube Youth Council. She stated that last year, the event centred around discussions on digitalisation in agriculture and e-government. However, this year the focus shifted to the pressing issue of brain drain and talent migration. The event took place at the European Youth Centre in Budapest and was divided into two sections. During the first section, attendees had the opportunity to listen

to presentations on various topics. The Ministry Commissioner presented Modern Cities and Hungarian Village program, outlining the development programs implemented in Hungary's convergence regions, particularly border regions. These efforts aim to bridge the gap between Hungarian towns and catch up with other urban areas. Additionally, representatives from the Central European Service for Cross-Border Initiatives introduced the Access Project, which commenced in September under the Interreg Program HU-SK. They provided insights into the project's objectives, focusing on identifying legal and administrative obstacles and proposing solutions to overcome them in border regions. Presentations from the Danube Youth Camp also garnered significant interest among attendees.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH added that such events exemplify the diverse approaches to organizing National Participation Days, with some led by steering group members and national coordinators, while others are driven by civil society initiatives. She emphasised that the goal within this priority area is to ensure that all countries in the Danube region host these events and tailor them to their specific interests and needs. Currently, 11 out of 14 countries and regions have organized participation days, and the aim is for all countries to have at least one event, with continued participation from those who have already hosted them. Plans for an event in Baden-Württemberg in 2025 were also mentioned.

Stefan LÜTGNAU stated that Bulgaria is planning an event, with the initiative coming from civil society.

Gabriela KATALIN SOLIMOSI-DOBI continued by stating that following such events, they conduct follow-up activities to assess the impact and gather feedback from both state and non-state actors, as well as to explore any new connections established during the event.

Stefan LÜTGNAU also added that it is crucial that these national participation days are integrated into the broader framework of the EUSDR processes. By establishing contacts and communicating them beforehand, we can facilitate the sharing of information and lessons learned, ultimately enhancing collaboration and mutual learning across the region.

Fiona FAAS (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg DE) stated that such events do not always have to be big undertakings. In January, they convened the Civil Society Network EUSDR at the State Ministry with the participation of State Secretary Florian Hassler. This loose network mainly consists of non-governmental and voluntary organisations actively implementing projects, whether on a regional or interregional scale. The State Ministry in its capacity as NC and PA 10 SG members, aims to organise such formats on a regular basis to bring together partners with a low threshold for participation and to foster collaboration among various actors. In some countries, it may be beneficial to link such gatherings to existing events like festivals or Europa Day celebrations. For instance, the cities of Ulm and Neu-Ulm host the Danube Festival every two years, and this July, there will be a conference titled "The Danube Region after the European Elections 2024: Perspectives for Civil Society." This event will be co-designed by the Baden-Württemberg foundation, the State Ministry and civil society stakeholders. Additionally, she stated that BW is considering organising a national participation day in the coming years, possibly as a German national participation day. While the format is yet to be determined, there is a commitment to revitalizing this initiative.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH adds that if organising such an event from scratch seems daunting, there are opportunities to integrate it with other existing events or conferences that already attract relevant stakeholders. Additionally, if accessing civil society stakeholders directly proves challenging, reaching out to the Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF) may provide assistance in engaging with stakeholders. National events can also serve as an effective platform to reach a broader audience. Moreover, these events offer an opportunity to invite representatives from specific policy areas to participate in focus groups or collaborate on policy co-design. Such collaborations can be particularly beneficial for presidencies seeking input from civil society.

Stefan LÜTGNAU states that they are planning to organise a national participation day in Bosnia Herzegovina, focusing on informing attendees about the strategy and clarifying what is and isn't part of it. It's a learning process aimed at building a community of informed and interested individuals.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH commends the organisation of a participation day in Ukraine during times of conflict and transition and introduced the upcoming Danube Participation Day.

#### Outcomes:

The Steering group notes the importance of National Participation Days.

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

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Claudia SINGER-SMITH provided a brief update on the upcoming Danube Participation Day, focusing on the programme which includes the ongoing discussion surrounding enlargement and the role of civil society and local actors in EU enlargement (see **Annex 5. PPNT PA10 VIE 2**). This discussion extends beyond Ukraine and Moldova, as the topics discussed are relevant to other candidate countries as well. She mentioned openness to suggestions for a title for the event. The day will include a panel discussion with NGOs, the presidency of EUSDR, and the European Commission, reflecting on last year's discussions and addressing tension fields. They also mentioned exploring how macro regional strategies can support EU enlargement and influence cooperation. Financing and capacity building will be highlighted as soft instruments for cooperation in the panel discussion. Following this, she presented the plan to move into transition labs to discuss views on financing, capacity building, and participation dialogue, aiming to identify needs, rationalize shortcomings, and highlight opportunities. The day will conclude with a Funder's talks, including representatives from DRP, development agencies, and international organisations such as CEI. Additionally, there will be a Danube Participation Agora, providing a marketplace for projects and initiatives to network. The event will be held back-to-back with the annual forum at the University of Technology Vienna. They noted that registration is open, and they encourage attendance and spreading the news to stakeholders.

Stefan LÜTGNAU mentioned conducting a series of hearings with various stakeholders when designing the programme. They also mentioned distributing questionnaires, with the feedback indicating a desire for more in-person meetings and exchanges.

Roland ARBTER spoke on behalf of the Austrian presidency, he noted that the Danube Participation Day (DPD) marks the first day of the three days dedicated to the EUSDR. They expressed satisfaction with the fact that the DPD has become a model event. He also mentioned that the topic of the participation day aligns with the priorities of the presidency, with topics such as enlargement receiving support. While the Annual Forum registration is not yet open, it will be soon, along with the program, emphasizing the importance of cooperation in shaping transformation. He outlined that the first day will feature a special session for mayors of the EUSDR, followed by discussions on green transition and other EUSDR topics in interactive workshops involving all Priority Areas (PAs). He also mentioned that enlargement will be addressed on the first day, alongside the ministerial meeting in the evening, with participation from foreign affairs ministers. The second day will focus on future perspectives, discussing regional policies and challenges for the next decade, including adapting the framework and incorporating the future of cohesion policies. Afternoon site visits, including the European Forum Wachau, with a Danube salon, will also be included

Teresa STUMMER mentioned that the Europa Forum Wachau will take place in Krems, with the topics focusing on female insights into the future of Europe.

Roland ARBTER stated that he is pleased that Bosnia will assume the chair, and they are in contact with them to ensure continuity in the second part of their presidency.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH stated with regards to communication and mobilizing stakeholders, that she encourages disseminating the Danube Participation Day as well as the Annual Forum through all communication channels. Additionally, she commenced the discussion on the topics for next year, although it's challenging without knowing the priorities of the Bosnian presidency yet.

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Roland ARBTER suggested a topic related to quality of life or public services.

Stefan LÜTGEMAU mentioned that if there are any ideas for partners in Bosnia who might have topics in mind, it would be helpful to share your input.

Fiona FAAS suggested brain drain might be an idea, which has been brought up by their network in Bosnia in recent discussions.

Teresa STUMMER mentioned an Erasmus+ project in Bratislava, and some of the topics mentioned by the youth participation from Bosnia were brain drain and enlargement because these are the issues that affect them the most.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH indicated another topic that was brought up was the implementation of the Green Deal, as there was some confusion regarding how to actually implement it. That could also be something under the overall topic of quality of life.

Stefan LÜTGEMAU mentioned the idea of hosting an online seminar with 3-4 steps on the Green Deal.

Teresa STUMMER continued by stating that last year at the Europa Forum Wachau, they had a group of young Bosnian politicians who were involved in the process of determining what they can do. They can ask one of their contacts to give the contact to this group.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK stated that in exploring what the Green Deal means for candidate countries, if the group might have heard about the reach-out organized by DG CLIMATE for 2-3 years now with climate ambassadors. She is not sure if it concerns other countries beyond the EU, but it's a good initiative and a good direction to engage. People who are local leaders act as ambassadors of the Green Deal. It might be interesting to link to them, so that a similar approach might be considered for the candidate countries. They could provide you with contacts. There might be scope for linking these.

Jernej GRAHOR presented Bled Strategic Forum and Young Bled Strategic Forum, which will take place on 2-3rd of September and 30 August - 1 September 2024 respectively, focusing on capacity building and discussions on parallel realities, perspectives, bridging communities, and limiting conflicts.

Teresa STUMMER inquired about the Danube Youth Council Mandates

Katharina LENZ provided an update on the Danube Youth Council Mandates, mentioning that three members remain, and half of them would like to prolong for an additional year. Expectations for changes next year were discussed, and all calls for positions were disseminated to the National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators.

### Outcomes:

The Steering group notes the changes in the Danube Youth Council.

The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the updates related the Bled Strategic Forum and the Young Bled Strategic Forum.

The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the EUSDR Danube Participation Day on 19 June 2024.

The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the EUSDR Annual Forum from 20-21 June 2024.

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

Claudia SINGER-SMITH mentions the work on a cross-macro-regional network for smart communities, which was also mentioned in the morning when discussing digitalisation (see **Annex 5. PPNT PA10 VIE 2**). The project Smart Era, financed by Horizon, aims to develop an approach for smart rural development in small municipalities and regions. Smart development focuses on using digital tools and creating user-centric services, integrating participation. Digital tools may be a factor, but not necessarily the sole focus, as they can also be used for communication. Within this project, there are pilot regions applying these approaches called smart innovation packages. Three of these regions are in the Danube Region out of the six, and there will be a call for other initiatives. These calls will be carried out within the macro-regions and are expected to open in 2025, requiring something to be done in between. The focus is on setting up smart communities and promoting the approach, raising awareness, and increasing capitalization. The discussion aimed to

assess if anyone is aware of any strategic initiatives or projects dealing with smart rural development and to identify stakeholders to approach or address.

Tatjana KRALJ asked for more details about the call and mentioned that the respective policy is being handled by another ministry, which she does not have contact with yet.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH states that the call will be published by the Smart Era consortium partner, and communication will run with the macro-regions. The EUSAIR facility point is also part of that network. It is a Horizon call within the project, aiming to anchor this initiative with EUSAIR and use it as a tool for enlargement.

Teresa STUMMER mentioned DIGI4CE, which focuses on digitalization in care for elderly people together with CZ and DE, suggesting that something similar might be interesting for this network.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH suggested that there might be a need to cluster across topics.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK emphasized that the objective is not digitalisation as such but the development of an area, focusing on territorial development and participatory community development with the help of digital tools.

Gabriella KATALIN SOLYMOSI-DOBI linked smart initiatives to the ongoing process between HU and AT on cross-border ambulance services, highlighting differences in licenses, regulations, and coordinating platforms between the two countries. For the future, this might be addressed after the bilateral agreement is signed.

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Claudia SINGER-SMITH asked about community-led initiatives in rural areas.

Gabriella KATALIN SOLYMOSI-DOBI suggested collecting local needs and considering local conditions to gain deeper insight into the lives of locals and attract the attention and interest of the younger generation.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH suggested reaching out to more stakeholders and finding focus areas, proposing an extended steering group meeting for in-depth brainstorming on creating a platform or project initiative to implement this approach.

Roland ARBTER bid farewell and thanked the group, wishing them a successful further meeting.

### Outcomes:

The PA 10 Steering Group took note on organising extended Steering Group meetings on the following topics:

- Involving local communities, stakeholders in Smart Communities initiative

Claudia SINGER-SMITH introduced the implementation report and expressed gratitude to the members who provided input. Acknowledged that not all countries were equally represented and emphasized the importance of encouraging more sharing because each member has valuable insights. Proposed recording reasons for non-attendance of steering group members to understand the discussions better and proposal was accepted by the group.

Katarina LENZ presented the recent report on EUSDR, which occurs biannually (see **Annex 7. PPNT DSP**). She mentioned that all reports go to the European Commission, which produces the overall report on the macro-regional strategies. She emphasized the importance of this feedback for understanding participation, contributions, and achievements, which inform EUSDR strategic coordination and policy recommendations.

Tatjana KRALJ asked if the implementation report will be based on the same questionnaire filled out for the Commission.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK confirmed receipt of all inputs from the Danube Strategy and expressed gratitude to contributors. She further stated that the final document into chapters per strategy and emphasised collaboration to ensure the report's accuracy and value. Announced the Macro-Regional Strategies and Sea-Basin Strategies Day in Brussels from 12-13 June, inviting PAs and steering group members to attend, with opportunities for networking and engagement.

Katharina LENZ noted that the invitation was forwarded to National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinations.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH suggested notifying Priority Areas Coordinators that the invitation can be sent to Steering Groups as well and mentioned the availability of steering group members' lists on the website. Ensured that invitations would be sent shortly to everyone.

#### Outcomes:

The PA10 Steering Group took note of the upcoming Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days in Brussels.

The PA10 Steering Group took agreed on future inquiries on reason for non-attending members.

## EUSDR Flagship Projects

## Item 6

Katharina LENZ provided an overview of the importance of flagships, emphasising their role as communication tools to strengthen both internal and external communication of the strategy (see **Annex 8. PPNT DSP 2**). Highlighted that flagships showcase the progress of the strategy, demonstrate concrete projects, and illustrate the impact of the EUSDR. Mentioned that flagships can serve as model solutions for other partners and also highlight challenges. Encouraged attendees to consider events where flagships can be presented and suggested campaigns within priority areas, such as newsletters. Shared a video produced last year for PA10 as an example.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH informs the participants about this year's flagships project and calls upon the vote on three of them which will be nominates as Priority Area 10 Flagships for 2024.



After the voting procedures the following three project/initiatives/platforms were selected:

- National Participation Day
- Cross-border emergency health services
- Mothers for ecology and peace

The projects will be sent to Danube Strategy Point for certification and then shared with the steering group

#### Outcome:

The PA 10 Steering Group voted on the EUSDR PA 10 Flagships for 2024.

### Steering Group: Adapting Rules of Procedure

#### Item 7

Claudia SINGER-SMITH presented a minor adjustment to the Rules of Procedure (RoPs), noting the absence of a specific procedure for online meetings. Highlighted the issue of fluctuations in attendance, which complicates establishing a quorum (see **Annex 5. PPNT PA10 VIE 2**). Emphasized that general meetings are held on-site, with hybrid meetings considered optional and on-demand. Stressed the importance of encouraging in-person attendance. Addressed the impact on decision-making, explaining that online meetings require establishing a quorum for each agenda item to advance decisions. Asked if there were any objections to the amendment, to which there were none, and thus, the amendment was passed.

#### Outcome:

The PA10 Steering Group voted to amend RoP regarding hybrid meetings.

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### Seed Money Facility – What comes after the submission of proposals?

#### Item 8

Claudia SINGER-SMITH provided an update on the Seed Money facility, noting that they have received four applications for PA10 thus far. Mentioned the lack of prior interactions with project promoters but highlighted plans for a strategic assessment. Explained that the assessment will focus on the projects' links to the priority area. Expected the projects to be selected by June 24, with assessment completion by the end of May.

She additionally proposed the possibility of arranging an online exchange with project partners or sending a summary of the projects, asking for feedback on the matter. Specifically mentioned the projects WIN, LUNA, and HARMONMISSIONS.

#### Outcome:

The PA 10 Steering Group took note of the Danube Region Programme Seed Money Facility assessment procedures.

### Updates from the EU Danube Strategy Presidency

#### Item 9

The updates from the EU Danube Strategy Presidency were given in the morning session of the 1<sup>st</sup> Day of the 26<sup>th</sup> Steering Group Meeting.

## AoB

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

## Closing Session

Claudia SINGER-SMITH thanks the organisers. Claudia SINGER-SMITH closes the meeting for Day 1.

Thursday, 25 April 2024 | Day 2

## Study Visit – Healthcross for future

## Item 10 &11

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

During the study visit the Health Across Team led a presentation about the initiative followed by a visit of the centre and a discussion round (**Annex 9. PPNT Healthcross, Annex 10. PPNT Healthcross MED Gmünd**).

Health Across aims to break down barriers in healthcare access across borders. Founded in 2017, Health Across has evolved from an initial project into a comprehensive initiative.

Focus: Promoting borderless healthcare and addressing social themes.

Health Across in Practice: Necessity for treaties to facilitate cooperation.

Examples of successful collaborations: State treaties for emergency services between Austria and Czech Republic (2016).

Interreg projects fostering cooperation: Training Austrian doctors in Czech Republic for endometriosis treatment; Interreg projects such Bridges for Birth facilitating birth-related surgeries in Slovakia for Austrian patients; Digital cancer cell diagnosis collaboration between Austria and Hungary; Interreg projects such as DigiCare4CE and Digi-Pat contributing to digital healthcare advancements.

Health Across MED NED project focusing on: Cross-border palliative care; Hospital cooperation in invasive cardiology; Digital cross-border training for healthcare professionals.

Achievements: Development of roadmaps for cross-border healthcare, recognised as good practice by the WHO.

Challenges and Solutions: Overcoming administrative burdens and legislative obstacles; Utilizing b-solutions and expertise exchange to address specific issues; Introduction of mechanisms to analyse and resolve cross-border healthcare challenges; Importance of political will and trust-building for successful cooperation.

Future Directions:

- Exploration of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) to streamline cross-border healthcare initiatives.
- Continued collaboration between countries and regions to enhance cross-border healthcare services.
- Participation in workshops and events facilitated by DG REGIO and DG SANTE to further develop cross-border health services.
- Need for bilateral treaties and trust-building to lay the foundation for successful cross-border cooperation.

Outcome:

The PA10 Steering group notes that further inquiry to address further topics is important for advancing cross-border healthcare in the Danube Region.