

27th Meeting of the Steering Group of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation” of the EUSDR (PA10)

- Draft Minutes -

28-29 November 2024 | Venue: Gartenzimmer, State Ministry Baden-Württemberg
Address: Villa Clay-Haus, Richard-Wagner-Straße 39, 70184 Stuttgart

Main Outcomes

Participants Day 1:

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

Participants Day 2:

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

9 out of 14 EUSDR countries were represented at the 27th Meeting of the Steering Group of Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”. The quorum therefore was reached. The following countries were represented: AT, BA, BG (online participation), HR, CZ, DE (Baden-Württemberg on-site and Bavaria online), HU (online participation). Online participants cooperated in activities throughout different parts of the programme, a quorum count was therefore implemented regularly throughout the programme. While EC and EESC attended the first day only, BG, MD, RS, SK, UA, CEI excused themselves due to work related obligations and HR constraints in the time of the meeting.

Furthermore, the European Commission (DG REGIO, only first day), the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), the Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF) were present on site.

Main outcomes of the discussion:

- The PA10 Steering Group took note of several projects, among them the thematic point Extended SG Meeting on Digitalisation in the Public Sector, the AdCap4GoodGov, the Cross-border Emergency Initiative with a status overview and identification of next steps for cooperation, and the EUSDR Project fund with good practice initiatives within Baden-Württemberg.
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the latest updates from the Austrian Presidency, highlighting its main outlines and priorities.
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the presentation on the Network of ESF+ Managing Authorities in the Danube Region, a possibility of SG members to work closer with the network has been proposed.
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the European Commission / DG Regio explaining what to expect from the new commission.
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Presidency to the EUSDR presenting the thematic focus of their presidency, outlined key events and dates with invitations to all stakeholders within the Danube region to actively contribute to the events.

- The PA10 Steering Group took note of the Flagship projects Mothers for Peace and Ecology and National Participation Days. Project representatives were presented with a symbolical certificate.
- The PA10 Steering Group took note of key Priority Area 10 events and future activities within their programme (Danube Participation Day, Platform on Media Literacy, National participation Days, Young Bled Strategic Forum, Smart Communities)
- The PA10 took note of activities and events supporting stakeholders in Priority Area 10
- The PA10 agreed to a proposal to host the 28th SG Meeting of PA 10 in the first half of 2025 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the 29th SG meeting in Czech Republic.

Upcoming events:

14-15 May 2025 PA10 Steering Group Meeting (BA)

13 or 16 May 2025 National Participation Day (BA)

29-31 August 2025 Young Bled Strategic Forum (SI)

1-2 September 2025 Bled Strategic Forum (SI)

5-6 November 2025 EUSDR Annual Forum (BA)

Thursday, 28 November 2024 | Day 1:

Welcome

Jernej GRAHOR (PAC 10/Centre for European Perspective) and **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** (PAC 10/City of Vienna) welcomed all participants to the 27th EUSDR PA 10 Steering Group Meeting together with **Niombo LOMBA** (State Ministry Baden-Württemberg).

Jernej GRAHOR presents the agenda for the 27th Steering Group Meeting of PA 10 (see Annex 1 Agenda). The agenda was adopted by the Steering Group.

All participants introduced themselves in a brief tour de table.

Extended SG Meeting on Digitalisation in the Public Sector – Presentation and Next steps

Claudia SINGER-SMITH (PAC 10/City of Vienna) and **Andreea PRASACU** (PAC 10/City of Vienna) presented the thematic point Extended Steering Group Meeting on Digitalisation in the Public Sector, regarding the recent online meeting held in September and developments on the topic.

As mentioned, there are a lot of initiatives going on, there are mandatory agendas and strategies on digitalisation due to the digital decade (implemented for the EU members), and there is also the necessity for candidate countries to work with digitalization. The aim of the meeting held in September was to establish a state of play across the EUSDR member states regarding digitalisation, with a focus on identifying stakeholders and defining possible next steps.

The current state of digitalisation within the region was further showcased with reference to the online service index of 2022, indicating that the data is based on a maturity index with around 60 indicators, showcasing the varying levels of digitalisation across countries. The presentation highlights the good practices, performance of the overall region in the field and leading countries in specific aspects of development. As noted, the index is not complete due to non-inclusion of candidate countries in the data. The discussion leads to the presentation of cross-border services and digitalisation, with significant issues hindering full mobility and cooperation with challenges noted as the recognition of documents

and acceptance of cross-border IDs, which complicate the provision of services across borders. As noted, the Extended SG focused on finding common themes, challenges and opportunities in the field of digitalisation, with possibility of implementation based on good practices. These topics are legal framework, process design, interoperability and funding. A discussion followed engaging the participants of the SG Meeting, contributing examples of topics on the national and cross border level that might be of help with further research and development on the subject, discussions on the best next steps of approach towards finding opportunities of cooperation about digitalisation and specific points that should be considered when exploring the process of digitalisation in specific national context. **Teresa Stummer** asked if the meeting also addressed the topic of data protection as one of important focus areas. **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** explained the topic has been discussed and offers potential for further capacity building and exchange. However, when working with this topic, the degree of centralisation of public institutions and administrative systems needs to be considered as this impacts on the countries' approaches to data protection and data transfer. **Niombo LOMBA** expressed the example of their State Ministry, that developed technical solutions for the use of institutions based on challenges to data protection. Further underlying that this challenge can be a motor for innovation and further development, together with an outlook on other tools and approaches already on the market. **András EDELÉNYI** asked for examples on different levels (national, local, cross-border) for citizen centred solutions and tools. **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** expressed examples of bottlenecks in cooperation, and the cooperation within cross border health services as a good example of exchange among practitioners and experts, that build trust and a joint approach based on joint challenges. In the field of digitalisation, health care providers therefore are challenged by the sharing of information and data, that can be one of the aspects where cooperation has a direct effect on positive changes and services for citizens. **Teresa STUMMER** pointed out an example of cooperation within her former position, the Austrian Ministry of Interior, and solutions for a system development of following criminal wrongdoing through cross border and interagency cooperation, where the need for cooperation led to closer synchronisation and synergies, and data protection was a major concern in the development. Different approaches to cooperation are therefore developed either from the need side (with a demand for closer cooperation and solution development) or the legal side (facilitated by the need to reach certain standards or legal framework). The different approaches method of implementation and innovation was also underlined by **Gabriella SOLYMOSI-DOBI**. **Midhat DŽEMIĆ** underlined the importance of different approaches, that best correspond to the country needs (either centralized or decentralized). Furthermore, he mentioned a reform agenda that candidate countries provided to the European Commission, that also focused highly on the field of digitalisation, highlighting the importance of the topic and commitment of countries to further development. **Katharina LENZ** expressed the topic of cooperation in digitalization in the field of transport, connected to the topic of synchronising and updating timetables for public transport, as a concrete method of cooperation that could be explored among countries. She answered a question posed by **Ms SINGER-SMITH** if the topic is followed by Priority Area 1B. **Ms LENZ** provided an answer that it was previously addressed but is not in the focus currently as of her knowledge. **Niombo LOMBA** asked a question regarding the European Health Data Space, and if it would be included and further approached within activities on both the digitalisation and cross border health services within PA 10. **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** responded that being an established format, it would be worthwhile checking, how to integrate the European Health Data Space in the work of PA10 on cross-border cooperation and digitalisation, also with regards to PA 10's cooperation on cross-border healthcare.

Claudia SINGER-SMITH suggested next possible steps such as bilateral exchanges on the subject with stakeholders or a strategic seminar on digitalisation, the mapping of initiatives across Member states, the identification of cross-border projects, an outlook to implemented and potential studies and partnerships with stakeholders active in the field.

For more information on the topic Annex 2_Digitalisation of Public Services_ PPT PAC10.

Presentation of the AdCap4GoodGov project

Raluca HERPEAN (Ministry of Public Works, Development and Administration, Romania) presents the AdCap4Good Gov project, that focuses on administrative capacity as an essential lever for good governance. The project is funded by the Interreg Europe Programme 2021-2027 second call, under objective 6 (Better Governance).

As described, common challenges of governments include keeping up with a constantly changing environment; meeting the continuous evolving needs of the citizens, dealing with the pressure to integrate technological developments, providing qualitative public services while being limited with resources, both financial and material, as well as having limitations in terms of human resources. As noted, administrative capacity plays a key role in tackling these challenges and opportunities. The discussion emphasized that administrative capacity is a merger of different elements, including human resources, financial resources, and infrastructure, which are essential for effective public administration. There is a concern regarding the lack of a clear and generally accepted definition of administrative capacity, which complicates its assessment and improvement.

The project includes 7 partners with the lead partner being the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration (Romania). The Advisory partner is The Association of Communes of Romania, and project partners are the City of Viechtach (Germany), Langhe Monferrato and Roero Development Agency (Italy), City of Sint-Niklaas (Belgium), Kekava Municipality Local Government (Latvia) and Federation of Municipalities of the Region of Murcia (Spain).

The project aims to assess the administrative capacity required for achieving local and regional policy objectives, focusing on identifying key elements and their impact on service delivery. The project will involve eight originally developed events, organised one by each partner, with the first inter-regional event having taken place in Bucharest in September and the second planned for Germany at the end of February 2025. The presentation highlights the frameworks, methodology and activities foreseen in the implementation of the program. As described, the expected results of the project include improving the public policy instruments addressed on the administrative capacity measures, to design and implement better policies, favouring the development of the necessary conditions for an open, participatory, inclusive and accountable government, that can provide quality services, and meeting the evolving needs of citizens.

The presentation was followed by a discussion with members of the PA 10 Steering Group, with proposals, ideas and concerns on the subject and project implementation, as well as support. **András EDELÉNYI** started the discussion by congratulating the team and the efforts supported by the progress, with concrete positive effects on the different levels of cooperation. He continued with advice based on examples of past projects, that the activities should be aware of the challenges in high number of legal procedures (on the EU level, leading to national level). The amount of legislation in EU is high. A step-by-step approach towards synchronisation of policy therefore needs to be steadily implemented, with stable environments that enable individuals as well as institutions to adjust. A good balance of approaches might therefore be beneficial to the project. An overview of how digitalisation can be instrumental in the aims of the project could also be beneficial. **Raluca HERPEAN** mentioned that the environment in which the framework has been established, namely in 2016, and the environment today show a different and higher role of digitalisation aspects, not only as a tool for administrative capacity but one of integrated aspects within administrative capacity. Good practices are being identified, and the team is aware that digitalisation will need to be followed, also as a potential separate indicator within the project. **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** mentioned the examples of digitalisation with effects on the local level, and what its effect or applications could be for the presented project. **Raluca HERPEAN** mentioned that their approach might be interesting also for the local level, where they have a regulator capacity and they could provide stakeholders and institutions with good and bad case studies, capacity building, suggestions on better creation of services for people, furthermore, also

potentially facilitating development through supportive policy development and legislation. **Niombo LOMBA** underlined the topic of EU efforts for lowering the amount of Bureaucracy, that might also be interesting to follow within the project as one of the specific issues of target focus. **Monika PAVLISOVA** expressed the interest of the project, as it is closely interconnected with her work, and would be interested to see the progress of the research and project outputs, especially in the field of lowering administrative burden. **Raluca HERPEAN** mentions they are implementing an additional project that focuses on wider aspects of cooperation aspects for provision of services, that might be of interest to stakeholders of the meeting. **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** pointed out that the results of this project would be relevant for PA10's activities on smart local development and smart communities.

For more information on the topic see Annex 3_ AdCap4GoodGov project presentation.

Cross-border emergency initiatives in the Danube Region – Status overview and next steps for the Task Force

Claudia SINGER-SMITH (PAC 10/City of Vienna) presented the Cross-border Emergency Initiative with a status overview and identification of next steps for cooperation.

In a review of the implemented activities, it was mentioned that an expert roundtable on cross-border emergency healthcare took place in February 2024, and a study visit was conducted in April 2024 to explore healthcare facilities that serve patients from both Austria and the Czech Republic.

The next steps involve stakeholders identifying specific topics for closer examination and considering bilateral exchanges to address unique issues in cross-border healthcare.

The speaker encouraged participants to share any topics or issues they encountered from their stakeholders that could inform future discussions and project designs, leading to a cross-border healthcare mapping.

There is a suggestion to organize an expert roundtable workshop to delve deeper into the various approaches to cross-border healthcare with potential for closer cooperation and expertise sharing.

For more information on the topic Annex 4_SGM_PAC10-CoV within the presentation on Cross-border emergency initiatives in the Danube Region.

Good Practice Presentation: EUSDR Project fund, The Foundation Baden Württemberg Stiftung and its Funding Program Perspektive Donau

Niombo LOMBA (State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg) and **Fiona FAAS** (State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg) present the EUSDR Project fund and initiatives within Baden-Württemberg.

The presentation highlighted the political support in Baden-Württemberg for the engagement of stakeholders as civil society, which was also strongly signalled by the introduction of State Councillor for Civil Society and Citizen Participation (as a government member) and the establishment of a project fund to support these initiatives, marking a significant shift towards active government involvement. The State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg supports various projects in the Danube Region through a fund for their activities, which are implemented in scopes of the political priorities, with a lead partner from Baden-Württemberg. Furthermore, the Baden-Württemberg Foundation that works complementary to the EUSDR Project Fund was presented by **Ágnes SEBESTYÉN** (Baden-Württemberg Foundation).

The Baden-Württemberg Foundation is one of the largest private foundations in Germany and was established by the State of Baden-Württemberg. It includes board representatives of the Parliament and Government but operates as an independent foundation. Its priority is to invest in the future of Baden-Württemberg with a focus on three key areas: research, education, and society and culture. The foundation was established by dedicated investment funds, property and totalling €2.3 billion, which are managed by the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Finance. The annual budget is around €40 million. The funding is distributed among the three main priorities that are as previously mentioned research, focusing on promoting innovation in key areas of science, business and society; secondly the strategic objective of society and culture (focusing on strengthening social cohesion and inclusion, promoting innovation in art and culture) and the strategic objective of education (promoting equal educational opportunities, meeting the demand for skilled workers, intercultural and international skills).

The presentation continued with a description of the funding program Perspektive Donau implemented in the scope of the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung. Since 2012, Perspektive Donau has supported more than 150 projects with a total funding volume of €4.5 million. The primary objectives of the funding include dissemination of innovative educational concepts and models, raising awareness of cultural ties and diversity in the Danube region, strengthening civil society engagement in the Danube region, improving professional and methodological capacities and providing emergency aid with emphasis on stakeholders in Ukraine after the acts of Russian Aggression on the territory of Ukraine in 2022. The main aims of the funding program include building bridges to foster cooperation, to bring the Danube region closer to the European Union and an effort to build a network of mutual support. The activities and structures put a strong emphasis on capacity building and support to interested partner stakeholders, with a structure of simplified application, support for ideas, partnership building and networking opportunities with peer institutions. The presentation was followed by a discussion on opportunities of cooperation and more detailed information on the structure of the program, namely. **Fiona FAAS and Niombo LOMBA** (both State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg) explained the Danube project fund of Baden-Württemberg as a good practice in order to highlight the opportunities for cooperation, and to encourage the SG members to seek opportunities to connect stakeholders, projects and other opportunities within the region. **Katharina LENZ** (Danube Strategy Point) asked if the project proposals and synergies require a lead partner from Baden Württemberg. Furthermore, she posed a question connected to the Project funds dedicated to the support in Ukraine, inquiring if the same fund will be implemented in the following year. **Ágnes SEBESTYÉN** (Baden-Württemberg Foundation) confirmed that the lead partners need to work in Baden Württemberg, whereas the partnerships can be wider and include other stakeholders. She also confirmed that the fund for support dedicated to Ukraine will be followed with repeated open calls in the next year. **Stefan LÜTGEMAU** (Danube Civil Society Forum/Foster Europe) proposed to upon the connections and established network of stakeholders in Ukraine, connect interested stakeholders with the foundation. As noted, the stakeholders in Ukraine have very good projects and structures, but on a case by case require institutional capacity, finances or external partners. **Niombo LOMBA** (State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg) suggested that this is a good idea, but it would need to be structured on a content specific and case by case basis to facilitate the process. **Midhat DŽEMIĆ** (Directorate for European Integration, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bosnian and Herzegovinian Presidency to the EUSDR) asked a question connected to a specific NGO partner from Bosnia and Hercegovina, with whom the Bosnian Presidency had a meeting. **Niombo LOMBA** (State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg) and **Ágnes SEBESTYÉN** (Baden-Württemberg Foundation) confirmed they both had meetings with the NGO and its representatives, and that the organisation's work is supported financially by both the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg and Baden-Württemberg Foundation. **Midhat DŽEMIĆ** added he will be in contact with the NGO representatives, for further opportunities to link the work with the upcoming EUSDR Presidency agenda. The discussion ended with an invitation to all stakeholders to reach to the Foundation Baden Württemberg or State Ministry of Baden Württemberg.

For more information on the topic see Annex 5 The Foundation Baden Württemberg Stiftung and its Funding Program Perspektive Donau.

Updates from the Austrian Presidency

Roland ARBTER (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management and the organisational team of the Austrian Presidency to the EUSDR), prepared a presentation on the implemented and upcoming activities of their presidency term.

The Austrian Presidency lasted for 14 months, starting on 1 November 2023, and is ending in December 2024 with a transition to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Main outlines and priorities of the Presidency mentioned include:

- not holding a specific direction of one or two policies to highlight during the Presidency term, but rather, along the slogan of shaping transformation and creating opportunities connecting different stakeholders along key EUSDR events and facilitating cooperation.
- highlighting the geopolitical context (with the topic of enlargement within the EU discussed in events and activities of key EUSDR stakeholders). In connection to facilitated discussions on the challenges and opportunities in the Danube region through different formats of engagement, the Presidency also supported activity on the subject topic on a political level (with discussions at ministerial level and dedicated support).
- with an outlook to the future development, greater resilience of the Danube region and progress within multiple discussions and events with key stakeholders, the Presidency has also addressed it within long term research and foresight documents commissioned to external experts (Think Piece on the need to step up cooperation for mastering future challenges in the Danube Region by Spatial Foresight and Regional and territorial trends in the Danube Region by Rosinak & Partner). The discussions and research can contribute to further development on the topics and growth in the region.
- on the most important policy areas recognising that there are transformation processes going on and that through cooperation and the specific aspects related to the EUSDR, these debates will continue in the future years on most important developments, may it be to the future of the Cohesion policy or other developments on the European level.
- the specific role of EU frameworks for cooperation, and the specific potential and element the EUSDR represents in connection with other EU frameworks. The message here is that EU frameworks are crucial for ensuring cooperation for providing a stable framework.
- focusing on the importance of governance in the strategy and to provide a space for the development in this field, by listening to the needs and proposals of key strategy stakeholders to provide the growth and development on this debate.
- as a horizontal principle, within all discussions focusing on a pluralistic approach, through partnership on eye level between institutions but also non-governmental partners, with civil society, with the EU. The overall formats and approach of the Austrian Presidency was prepared in a non-hierarchical partnership approach.

The Austrian Presidency welcomes all reflections, proposals and insights from stakeholders included in the Presidency and further opportunities for cooperation and joint support.

For more information on the topic see the webpage of the Austrian EUSDR Presidency (2023-2024) on the [link](#).

Network of ESF+ Managing Authorities in the Danube Region

Claudia SINGER-SMITH (PAC 10/City of Vienna) presented the Network of ESF+ Managing Authorities in the Danube Region.

The last meeting of the ESF+ network took place in September in Split, Croatia, marking the 11th meeting since the network's inception. The event enabled discussions in an exchange of policy overview, policy alignment and their scope, to identify funding opportunities and common themes shared by programs. The event also included the beginning of cooperation with IPA programs dealing with social affairs, labour markets and education from Moldova, Montenegro and Serbia. Some examples of the joint policies for cooperation include vocational training, skills and qualifications of young people, operationalizing of green skills, qualification and labour market inclusion and quality in education.

The activities of the network in 2025 include:

- Online Meeting in the beginning of the calendar year 2025, with a focus on Youth & Skills; Transnational Cooperation and funding post-2027
- 12th Meeting of the Network of ESF+ Managing Authorities, expected to be implemented in Slovakia with dates still to be confirmed.

The outline for discussion presented some of the open questions and thoughts for opportunities explored within the network that include, if the network wishes to prepare joint positions on the outlook of funding post 2027 and in what form and scope of stakeholder inclusion (namely also in reference on the relationship between funding and macro regional strategies, if a position should be limited to the work of ESF+ or also programs dealing with social affairs, or all programs that are part of cohesion funds and enlargement funds, also noting that a position from all 4 Macroregional Strategies would be beneficial). An opportunity for closer exchange between the SG members and members of the network is proposed and possible.

The discussion that followed included the research and events organized in the IPA countries. **Midhat DZEMIĆ** mentioned the analysis concerning IPA 3 funding prepared by the technical assistance team, that could be a good reference point and knowledge basis for cooperation or future work. **Tatjana KRALJ** emphasised the good practice implemented within the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Presidency of EUSAIR, that connected National Coordinators from both the Adriatic Ionian and Danube strategy. The good practice offers an opportunity for exchange with stakeholders included in the subject from both Macroregional Strategies (EUSAIR and EUSDR) and interconnected funding programs.

For more information on the topic consult Annex 4_SGM_PAC10-CoV within the presentation on Network of ESF+ Managing Authorities in the Danube Region.

Updates from the European Commission / DG REGIO on perspective and developments within EUSDR.

Karolina JASINSKA-MÜHLECK (European Commission, DG-Regio) cooperated in the discussion with online participation and prepared a presentation of the Commission, future processes and the relevance for the EUSDR.

- In reference to the future Commission policy, the speaker mentioned that the preparations for the future policy design are in full swing, with a target to prepare the proposal for the next part of the Annual Financial Framework by next May and sectoral policy proposals will follow. The speaker expressed concern about the lack of a clear political steer due to the change of the mandate of the Commission, which could impact the preparations for the future policy. The speaker indicated that the consultation process with stakeholders is closing by the end of

December (including various studies, consultations and discussions on the Macroregional Strategy level, programme levels, national levels and together with other stakeholders), which is crucial for shaping the Future Cohesion Policy.

- The new Commission, led by Ursula von der Leyen, has been mandated for a second term, with strategic guidelines presented to the Parliament for the next five years. The main focus thematic points include competitiveness, defence and security, preparedness to address events due to climate change, supporting people and helping societies transition, sustaining a new way of life, protecting democracies and values and enlargement. Inclusion of the listed priorities within the discussions of the Steering Group and overall work of the Priority Area showcase the alignment with the policy priorities of the Commission.
- A note was made on the process of the future budget delivery, and potential impacts on the functioning of future programs and cohesion policy programs which are related to funding of the strategies. As announced, the long-term budget proposed in 2025 will be more focused on alignment to top priorities and will be more policy based in comparison to programme based. Simplification and changes towards higher impact will also be in the forefront.
- The speaker also mentions the new Commissioner covering Cohesion Policy will be Raffaele Fitto, that has been together with the overall Commission College confirmed in the Parliament and will start its mandate as of 1 December. It is also mentioned that the future Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms will have a significant role, sharing supervision over enlargement with the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and overseeing various sectors including agriculture, fisheries, and sustainable transport.
- The implementation report is expected to be adopted in early spring, with the Council's conclusions anticipated in the second half of 2025.
- The next year's Macroregional Strategies event is scheduled to take place from 24 to 26 September in Brussels, also in this edition connecting the Macroregional and Sea Basin Strategies Days. The activities foresee an increased engagement of stakeholders from the Commission enabling exchanges and cooperation with stakeholders. Whereas the thematical priorities of the discussions foreseen are not yet known, stakeholders are encouraged to make proposals, share ideas and most importantly the needs of stakeholders. All levels of stakeholders are welcome and invited to the event.
- A question was raised by the SG members from the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg **Niombo LOMBA**, regarding discussions and processes to include future cohesion policy on the national level. There is a concern regarding the potential changes in funding mechanisms for cohesion policies, which may affect how funds are distributed to member states.
- There was concern expressed by **Tatjana KRALJ** regarding the scheduling of the Macroregional and Sea Basin Strategies week in September, as it conflicts with other events, particularly the Mediterranean Coast and Macroregional Strategies week in Slovenia.

Friday, 29 November 2024 | Day 2:

Outlook on the EUSDR Presidency 2025 in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Midhat DŽEMIĆ (Directorate for European Integration, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bosnian and Herzegovinian Presidency to the EUSDR) presents the outlook on the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region. The Presidency activities will begin as of 1 January 2025 with the end of the Austrian Presidency and will take place during the overall calendar year 2025.

The Bosnian and Herzegovinian Presidency will be organised under the slogan *Flowing Together, Growing Together*. The Priorities identified include:

- Speeding up the European integration process:
 - stronger involvement of the EU Commission's DG NEAR and related line DGs in the implementation of the EUSDR
 - supporting the upcoming processes towards the new Cohesion Policy and further enhancing the process of embedding of EUSDR into EU funding mechanisms and thus laying ground for availability of funding sources needed for the implementation of the EUSDR beyond 2027. Special attention will be paid to actions in connection with next IPA and NDICI planning and programming
 - exploring the opportunities arising from the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans that can potentially contribute to the accelerated implementation of the EUSDR
- Brain drains, the widening skills gap, depopulation and youth unemployment – also in connection with labour shortages and declining labour force
- Security - cooperation in areas of civil protection, disaster preparedness, and issues related to migration management, border security and organised crime
- Tourism and culture, green tourism as an inspiration for new tourist destinations, urban tourism connected with various festivals, eno- and gastrotourism
- Digital and energy connectivity (regional interconnections development, optimisation of the renewable energy sources, promotion of regional energy markets, energy storage, implementation of the EU's Emissions Trading System (ETS) for road transport and EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM))
- Digitalisation of businesses and public services as an instrument of improving the Danube Region's efficiency, sustainability, and competitiveness
- Regional contribution to the SDG UN Agenda 2030, involvement of major economic players, namely companies. Special focus will be paid to the application of the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS)

Mr **DŽEMIĆ** presented the foreseen activities of the Presidency, including statutory events, events of key stakeholders of the strategy and thematical activities included in the Presidency agenda. The list of activities is still under development and confirmation by the Presidency and partner organisations. The main outlined and confirmed activity event is the Danube Participation Day to be organised in Sarajevo on 4 November 2025, and the 14th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region foreseen for 5-6 November 2025.

For more information on the foreseen activities within the EUSDR Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina see Annex 6 Power Point presentation EUSDR Presidency 2025 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There were no further questions or discussion points by the Steering Group.

Presentation Flagship initiative – Mothers for Peace and Ecology

Andrea LAUX and **Olena KULYKOVA** (project Mothers for Peace and Ecology - MfP&E) implemented within the Mother Centres International Network for Empowerment (MINE) guided the participants through a prepared overview of the work of their respective project. The organisation has a long history of involvement in the region at various levels of engagement as well as through support for regional cooperation, with MfP&E being selected in 2024 as a Flagship project within the EUSDR by the Priority Area 10 Steering Group representatives. The project is funded by the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg for the period from 1 March 2024 until 28 February 2026.

The Mother Centre movement began in Germany in the early 1980s, with the aim of supporting stakeholders (mothers, women and other communities) from different economic and social backgrounds. Through facilitated support and network building, Mother Centres have been established as grass-roots structures of networks that contribute to care and community building on the level of individuals (mothers, their families and other members), neighbourhoods and whole communities, jointly empowering their voices through activities based on local needs. MINE works with Mother Centres in the Danube region and globally, contributing to international cooperation, representing and amplifying their voices in connection to other stakeholders (as national institutions) as well as providing needs-based capacity building and support.

The MfP&E project works in three main fields of action, supporting women, mothers, communities in Ukraine through facilitated dialogue and mutual exchange, providing capacity building for women, mothers and their supporters, and through the establishment of mother centres in Ukraine. The project implements a series of interactive workshops, community building activities, trainings, training sessions on leadership and trauma-sensitive action, and other events tailored to the needs of local communities and their stakeholders, with special attention to disadvantaged communities.

Ms LAUX and **Ms KULYKOVA** expressed a desire to invite others to further discuss the Mother Centres, indicating a potential for future collaboration and dialogue on different levels of engagement within their network. Main identified opportunities for cooperation include the engagement of more countries within the EUSDR and beyond who support a similar caring approach to overcome social disengagement, the support for building of new caring communities and the support for implementation of strong, supportive networks across borders.

The presentation ended with a symbolic certificate ceremony, from the representatives of the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg and the Priority Area 10 Coordinators to the representatives of the MfP&E project. For more information see Annex 7 Power Point presentation MfP&E project and the webpage of the [Mother Centres International Network for Empowerment](#).

Presentation Flagship initiative - National Participation Days

Stefan LÜTGENAU (Danube Civil Society Forum/Foster Europe) prepared a presentation reflecting on past implemented and future planned activities within the National Participation Days format. The National Participation Days have in the year 2024 by the vote of the Priority Area 10 Steering Group also received the title of a EUSDR flagship project, for their contribution and activity in the Danube region.

The multi-stakeholder, multi-level approach of engagement and cooperation of both state and non-state stakeholders that are significant within the activities of EU Macroregional Strategies have throughout the years established the foundations for consistent and structured engagement and active participation. The Danube Participation Day (implemented preceding the EUSDR annual forum) and National Participation Days implemented on the national level represent opportunities for such exchanges, support for civil society, youth and other stakeholders who are interested to engage. Such formats enable

an open, transparent discussion among stakeholders based on equal footing (therefore through discussions among non-state and state actors), and based on the needs of the local/regional communities. The communities built and maintained within these forums for exchange hold a consultation momentum, support for active democracy and engagement, serve as a connection of the local and regional dimension to their peers on the international cross-border level, and as such can contribute as generators of new ideas, partnerships and potential projects. Furthermore, more active engagement of stakeholders enables the more comprehensive promotion of the Danube Strategy, ownership and engagement. In 2024, National Participation Days were implemented in Austria and in Ukraine.

Mr LÜTGENAU presents the planned activities and current discussions for the upcoming calendar year 2025 that are, National Participation Days planned for Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Austria. All participating states and stakeholders within the strategy are invited to participate, through the organisation of National Participation Days in their countries.

The presentation ended with a symbolic certificate ceremony, from the representatives of the Priority Area 10 Coordinators to the representatives of the Danube Civil Society Forum/Foster Europe. For more information see Annex 08 Power Point presentation National Participation Days.

Platform on Media Literacy updates

Jernej GRAHOR (PAC 10/Centre for European Perspective) presents the topic Platform on Media Literacy, with updates and next steps foreseen within the project implementation. The digital environment presents both opportunities and challenges, including the credibility of information and the need for enhanced media literacy. Enhanced knowledge on the opportunities for higher engagement but also understanding of challenges as misinformation and disinformation allow citizens to make better understanding and opportunity for active participation. As stakeholders, projects, initiatives are active on different levels and through different priority aspects or fields of expertise, the first approach included the mapping of good practices. This enables the connection of activities from different sectors, across countries and fields of expertise.

The next steps involve the finalisation of the mapping exercise of good practices and bringing stakeholders together to form a community that can collaboratively address the challenges in the digital environment. A meeting of the stakeholders is foreseen for the first half of the year 2025.

For more information see Annex 09_SGM_PAC10-CEP).

Danube Participation Day 2024 results presentation and outlook to Danube Participation Day 2025

Claudia SINGER-SMITH (PAC 10/City of Vienna) presents the developments in the preparation for the Danube Participation Day 2025. PAC 10 and the DCSF will prepare the event in cooperation with the EUSDR Presidency in Bosnia and Hercegovina, and LDA Mostar as a side event to the EUSDR Annual Forum. PA10 Steering Group members and D-LAP members will be involved in the further development of the event. The date of the event will precede the EUSDR Annual Forum and is scheduled for 4 November 2025.

For more information on the topic Annex 4_SGM_PAC10-CoV within the presentation on Danube Participation Day.

Bled Strategic Forum & Young Bled Strategic Forum results presentation

Jernej GRAHOR (PAC 10/Centre for European Perspective) presents the activities implemented within the Bled Strategic Forum and Young Bled Strategic Forum 2024.

The 13th Young Bled Strategic Forum took place between 30 August and 1 September 2024 in Pokljuka, Slovenia. After completing the tailor-made program in Pokljuka, the Young Bled Strategic Forum participants actively participated at the 19th Bled Strategic Forum organized under the title “A World of Parallel Realities”, offering the perspectives of young professionals at the leading conference in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

The Young Bled Strategic Forum is a participant-driven platform where bright young minds from around the world come together to share ideas and find inspiration to improve their communities. The event hosted 41 young leaders (22 male and 19 female) from 30 countries, representing a wide range of backgrounds, including journalism, research, NGOs, diplomacy, activism, politics, and more. The event included active participation of young representatives from the Danube Strategy, including a representative from the Danube Youth Council.

The Young Bled Strategic Forum 2024 organised under the title “Restoring Common Ground”, exploring **how can young people, in a world of parallel realities, bring realities closer together to restore space for social action.** The program of the activities was developed in cooperation with international experts and partners, each contributing their own view and expertise to the main themes.

The issues discussed were:

- the divergence of realities in society, including its causes and how to bridge these divides;
- the role of misinformation in shaping public opinion and deepening social divides;
- sustainable cohabitation and how communities can work together to address global challenges, including climate change and social inequality, particular in relation to the other;
- how to use cultural heritage to restore common ground;
- what impacts did technological change have on communication and how to build trust;
- cross border, regional and international cooperation
- and other topics.

Major Milestones of the 2024 Young Bled Strategic Forum include

- **Selection Process:** Record-breaking 344 applications (a 45% increase compared to 2023) from 69 countries, indicating growing interest in the forum.
- **Expansion of the Alumni Network:** The Young Bled Strategic Forum alumni network grew with the addition of 41 new members, who will now serve as ambassadors for the forum.
- **Increased Visibility:** The visibility of Young Bled Strategic Forum was enhanced through mentions in Bled Strategic Forum materials and speeches by prominent figures, including Slovenian Foreign Minister Tanja Fajon, who highlighted the excellence of Young Bled Strategic Forum participants.
- **Multi-layer inclusion in the Bled Strategic Forum:** The participants were involved in the Bled Strategic Forum on three different levels: 1) as speakers at discussions (9 participants) and side events (11 participants), 2) being the first to pose questions or comments following discussions, and 3) leading three Young Bled Strategic Forum-powered discussions on the second day of the event, showcasing their perspectives and insights.

The programme activities offer an opportunity for further engagement of stakeholders and topics, experts and most importantly youth, with special attention to the Danube Youth Council in following editions of the event. The next steps of event implementation include a development of thematical focus for the 2025 Young Bled Strategic Forum and Bled Strategic Forum in the first half of the year 2025 and the implementation of both events in August-September 2025.

For more information see Annex 09_SGM_PAC10-CEP) Bled Strategic Forum Conference Report available on the [link](#).

Smart Communities Initiative - Update and discussion on further cooperation potentials

Claudia SINGER-SMITH (PAC 10/City of Vienna) presented the updates and next steps of the Horizon project Smart Era as part of PA10's Smart Communities Initiative. The Smart Era project aims to create vibrant rural communities by improving quality of life and service provision based on local needs. Support in these aspects can be facilitated through capacity building, support for projects, initiatives that improve the quality of life (if it is to create job opportunities, or possibly to improve mobility, improve sustainability and environmental protection or have effects in other methods). The overall effects in wider fields contribute to the attractiveness and higher benefit of residents to remain, work and live in the municipalities. The project is initiated in EUSALP and was supported the Alpine Space Programme, with a follow up project in the current formation. The initiative aims to spread the approach of Smart Innovation Packages to other macro-regions, enhancing advocacy at national and European levels. The aim of the project is also to spread the initiatives on the local level and, through the smart innovation packages provide guidance for transferable approaches, and a framework on addressing rural challenges with interconnected technological (digital means for consultation, cooperation and co designing development among stakeholders in the rural communities) and non-technological solutions (community centred approach). The aim of the project is not only to streamline the work of the project and create outreach on different levels, but to build a network of projects, initiatives and stakeholders working in the field, that is why the presenter encourages all stakeholders to share the project and invite other interested stakeholders to connect within the network.

In the duration of the project, there are pilot regions that will implement this smart innovation packages. The speaker mentioned that there will be a follower call in autumn 2025, which is expected to provide small funds for municipalities to implement individualized smart innovation packages. The speaker requested participants to share information about any institutions, organizations, or projects related to community-centred development, indicating a desire to connect and collaborate. A designated event is also proposed to the Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency in 2025, that would on the one side enable a wider connection and cooperation of interested stakeholders on the topic coming from different macro regional strategies, and secondly to enable a further promotion of the call.

A survey was conducted for thematic coordinators of all macroregional strategies regarding smart communities, with some already participating. The analysis is expected to be completed by early December.

SG members engaged in a discussion with proposals on good practices and potential partners that could be interested to participate in the project activities. As mentioned by **Stefan LÜTGENAU**, local entities in Ukraine have developed smart tools and community centre approaches, with involvement from local administrations and NGOs. This presents the question if the stakeholders also have an opportunity to participate in the call. **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** answered to check, whether Ukrainian project partners are also eligible in this call. As presented by **Fiona FAAS** the city of Ulm is currently implementing a model project for smart cities, named "Ulm4CleverCity", focusing on a place-based approach and youth engagement. The project is financed by the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community. The discussion that followed also explored different approaches of smart communities and developments on the project, as implemented in different communities, national levels and parts of the Danube Region, to reach a closer understanding of the opportunities within the projects and build stronger bridges to potential partners. **Niombo LOMBA** asked for a closer description of the term smart communities, to see where partners from Baden-Württemberg might be active in similar aspects. As presented by **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** the smart communities approach is derived from the concept

of smart villages, but has a more functional meaning that refers to different geographic scopes of specific activities and services. However, the smart village approach is rather directed at municipalities than cities. **Radka ŠTORKOVA** asked a question if the form of groupings on the local level in the Czech Republic names local action groups would also be a suitable target group for the presented opportunities of cooperation. **Claudia SINGER-SMITH** confirms.

For more information on the topic Annex 4_SGM_PAC10-CoV within the Power Point presentation Smart Communities Initiative

Update from the Danube Strategy Point & Danube Youth Council

Katharina LENZ (Danube Strategy Point) makes a short reference to the upcoming NC-PAC meeting organised in Vienna (Austria) on the 10th and 11th of December 2024, upcoming agenda of the event and needed logistical information.

Ms **LENZ** proposes the updates from the Danube Strategy Point and the Danube Youth Council to be shared in the form of a more comprehensive documentation and power point presentation, to be shared with the stakeholders of the PA 10 Steering Group in the aftermath of the event and therefore allow more time for potential discussions and open questions within the meeting.

Additional information is available in the PowerPoint presentation of the past and upcoming activities of the Danube Strategy Point (See Annex 10 Power Point presentation Danube Strategy Point).

Guidance Paper & Learning online platform for PA 10 Newcomers – Update and presentation of outcomes

Andreea PRASACU (PAC 10/City of Vienna) presents the Guidance Paper & Learning online platform for PA 10 Newcomers.

The newcomer compass consists of a two-part guide that includes both a paper version and an interactive online document, aimed at enhancing understanding of priority area 10, the overall strategy, its stakeholders and processes for everyone interested in cooperation. The Steering Group members are encouraged to engage with the newcomer compass to clarify their roles and expectations, fostering better communication and understanding for the processes within the strategy and the Priority Area.

The resources offer a comprehensive overview of information and first stop knowledge hub for all newcomers. Ms **PRASACU** thanks all the SG members and stakeholders who participated in the development of the resources, with feedback, needs analysis and proposals. In connection to the mentioned resources, Steering Group meetings and other formats of active participation offer important opportunities for participation of SG members within the Priority Area 10 and other processes within the Danube Strategy. Several one-on-one onboarding online meetings have also been implemented together with some of the SG members upon their request, and the option is always available in the future, together with direct assistance by Priority Area coordination teams.

Additional information is available in the PowerPoint presentation on the Guidance Paper and Learning online platform (See Annex 11 Power Point presentation Guidance Paper & Learning online platform for PA 10 Newcomers).

AOB

Since the Magnitude Project presentation could not be held at this meeting, the attendees agreed to hold the presentation later, possibly in the form of a virtual coffee table talk in early 2025. The PA10 Steering Group will be informed in due time.

The Czech Republic offered to host the 29th SG meeting in autumn 2025 in Prague.

After these comments, the PA10 Steering Group agreed to close the meeting.