



EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Implementation Report 2020-2021



Final Report, December 2022



With special thanks to EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and their teams and to EUSDR National Coordinators active in the period of 2020-2022.

Imprint:

This implementation report aims at illustrating EUSDR developments and achievements in the period 2020-2021 by focusing on activities on general EUSDR level and especially by taking into account activities on Priority Area level.

The main sources of this report are EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators' reports on the Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas via the EUSDR monitoring system and National Coordinators' reports to the European Commission, respectively, submitted in April/May 2022 for the period of 2020-2021. Furthermore, Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators provided feedback and additional information on the draft report in December 2022.

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Table of Abbreviations

AEBR	Association of European Border Regions
ASP	Associated Strategic Partner
B2B	Business-to-Business
BSF	Bled Strategic Forum
CBC	Cross Border Cooperation
CC	Carpathian Convention
CECE	Central European Cooperation in Education and Training
CEF	Connecting Europe Facility
CEI	Central European Initiative
CF	Cohesion Fund
CoR	Committee of the Regions
COST	European Cooperation in Science and Technology
DG CNECT	Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
DG EMPL	Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
DG ENER	Directorate-General for Energy
DG ENV	Directorate-General for Environment
DG HOME	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
DG JRC	Directorate-General Joint Research Centre
DG MOVE	Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
DG RTD	Directorate-General for Research and Innovation
DFCN	Working group on Danube Funding Coordination Network (PA 7)
DIAS	Danube Region Invasive Alien Species Network
DMWG	Disaster Management Working Group (PA 5)
DRBMP	Danube River Basin Management Plan
DRTD	Danube Region Transport Days
DRYP	Danube Region Youth Platform
DSP	Danube Strategy Point
DSTF	Danube Sturgeon Task Force (PA 6)
DYC	Danube Youth Council
DYN	Danube Youth Network
DTP	Danube Transnational Programme
EaSI	Employment and Social Innovation
EC	European Commission
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EGD	European Green Deal
EIB	European Investment Bank
EIRA	European Institute of Road Assessment
eMS	Electronic monitoring system

EP	European Parliament
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
ERA	European Research Area
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESA	European Space Agency
ESF	European Social Fund
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
EUSAIR	EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region
EUSALP	EU Strategy for the Alpine Region
EUSBSR	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
FRA	Fundamental Rights Agency
GWP	Global Water Partnership
HLG	High Level Group
IADR	Iron Age Danube Route
ICMPD	International centre for Migration Policy Development
ICPDR	International Commission for Protection of the Danube River
IDM	Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
ISRBC	International Sava River Basin Commission
IWT	Inland Waterway Transport
JS	Joint Secretariat
LoM	Letter of Merit
LoR	Letter of Recommendation
MA	Managing Authority
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MRS	Macro-regional strategy
NC	National Coordinator
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
NECP	National energy and climate plan
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OP	Operational Programme
ÖROK	Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning
PA	Priority Area
PAC	Priority Area Coordinator
PCC SEE	Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe
PCY	Presidency
QA/QC	Quality Assurance/Quality Control
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
R&D&I	Research and Development and Innovation
R&I	Research and innovation
RIS	River Information Services
RIS3	Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation



RoP	Rules of Procedures
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
S3	Smart Specialisation Strategy
SELEC	Southeast European Law Enforcement Center
SG	Steering Group
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
SONDAR	Soil Strategy Network in the Danube Region (PA 6)
TF	Task Force
TFDL	Task force on Danube Landscapes (PA 6)
TFPC	Task Force on pesticides and chemicals (PA 6)
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
UN	United Nations
UNECE ITC	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Inland Transport Committee
WG	Working Group
WGMPBD	Working Group Masterplan Bavarian Danube
WIIW	Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies

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1. Introduction

This Implementation Report illustrates developments and achievements of the EU Strategy of the Danube Region (EUSDR) made in the period 2020-2021 with a special focus on the activities of EUSDR National Coordinators (NCs) and Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) along with their Steering Groups (SGs)¹. In doing so, it takes up on the previous EUSDR Implementation Reports, covering 2016-2018² and 2019³.

The main sources for this report are the Priority Area Coordinators' reports on the Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas, the National Coordinators' reports to the European Commission for the 4th report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies as well as EUSDR meeting documents and minutes from PAC-, NC- and NC-PAC meetings.

The EUSDR Implementation Reports build an integral part of the new EUSDR monitoring system, which was elaborated by the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) in cooperation with the EUSDR core stakeholders. Based on the new monitoring concept, future EUSDR Implementation Reports are planned to be published biennially (in 2024 for the years 2022 and 2023; 2026 for the years 2024 and 2025 etc.).

Note in the light of current events

The end of 2021 was a milestone for the EUSDR. For the first time since its adoption, the EUSDR member countries welcomed the Presidency of a non-EU country with strong European integration intentions and a desire for joint development and prosperity of the Danube Region. This important moment was yet another confirmation of the equal cooperation of the participating countries, which goes beyond the EU borders.

However, at the beginning of 2022, the world was shaken by an unprecedented, illegal, unprovoked full-scale military invasion of the Russian Federation into the sovereign, peaceful Ukraine - the country that had just started its presiding over the EUSDR. Since the outbreak of the war, the entire European community has witnessed air strikes, shelling of cities, flows of refugees, attacks and atrocities occurring in one of the countries of the Danube Region.

It should be noted that the reporting and drafting of this report was undertaken after the outbreak of the war. EUSDR core stakeholders as well as the Ministers responsible for the EUSDR expressed in the strongest terms the condemn of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military invasion of Ukraine and its unprecedented war of aggression against Ukraine. The EUSDR considers this deliberate attack on a sovereign, peaceful state as a violation of international law and the principles of the UN Charter, and as undermining of European and global security and stability. The Ministers responsible for the EUSDR jointly called for the aggression to stop, the Russian forces to withdraw from the internationally recognised territory of Ukraine and all those responsible for war atrocities to be held accountable.⁴

Nevertheless, the following chapters focus on the reporting period 2020 and 2021 and therefore the war of aggression on Ukraine and its implications on the Danube Region do not form a substantial part of this Report.

¹ For basic information on the EUSDR, its core stakeholders, governance system etc., please visit the website <https://danube-region.eu/>.

² <https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Implementation-Report-2016-2018-incl.-Annexes.zip>

³ https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/EUSDR-Implementation-Report_2019_final_.zip

⁴ Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, 2022. [Online](#).

2. EUSDR Activities and Key Priorities in 2020-2021

As the previous EUSDR Implementation Report illustrates, in 2019 EUSDR core stakeholders focused on the alignment of EUSDR activities with funding sources (EUSDR Embedding), building up an adequate monitoring and evaluation system, strengthening communication, building EUSDR internal and cross-MRS capacity as well as the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan.

The reporting period of this Implementation Report, 2020 and 2021, was largely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the EUSDR Impact Evaluation⁵, 'COVID-19 had a significant influence on implementing the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 in 2020 and 2021. The pandemic had an impact especially on travel restrictions, tourism, economic recession, interrupted global value chains and new EU instruments. These have changed how the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and its implementation can be interpreted. Despite the obvious negative effects on personal contact, networking and coordination, many stakeholders also indicated positive effects from digitalisation, lower travel costs and wider outreach due to digital/videoconference formats for meetings and conferences.'

Another influencing factor was an earthquake that hit parts of the Danube Region in March 2020. The capital of the EUSDR presiding country, Zagreb, was hit by the strongest earthquake on record since 140 years. However, in spite of everything that happened, including pandemic-related lockdowns across Europe, the EUSDR core stakeholders have managed to bring the Strategy forward in its major fields of implementation.

Within the reporting period, the Strategy was chaired by Croatia in 2020 and by Slovakia in 2021.

Beside the core governance activities carried out by the Presidencies (PCY), the NCs and the PACs as well as the thematic activities carried out by the PACs, especially **embedding** the EUSDR into EU funded programmes, **monitoring and evaluation**, **strategic projects/processes (Flagships)**, **communication** and **capacity building** were high on the agenda of the EUSDR in 2020 and 2021. These topics were particularly discussed at meetings at EUSDR core governance level (see *Table 1*). Another central task was **youth involvement**. The following sub-chapters give a brief insight into these activities, before the main developments and achievements of EUSDR Priority Areas will be summarised in chapter 3.

2.1. EUSDR Core Governance Meetings and Documents

Due to the constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. travel restrictions), on-site meetings and events had to be cancelled almost completely. Thanks to the available online tools and the swift online-shift largely supported and provided by the DSP, most meetings at EUSDR governance level, including two EUSDR Annual Fora, could be held online or in a hybrid format. Thus, also in 2020 and 2021, EUSDR core stakeholders met regularly to address key aspects regarding the implementation of the Strategy:

Table 1: Meetings at EUSDR core governance level 2020-2021

Type	Date & Place	Focus
PAC Meeting	11-12/02/2020 Zagreb, HR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State of Play EUSDR (Priorities of Croatian EUSDR Presidency, Future EUSDR Presidency 2021) • Embedding of EUSDR into mainstream programmes • State of Play DTP

⁵ Spatial Foresight 2022: Policy/impact evaluation of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region. [Online](#).

Type	Date & Place	Focus
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New EUSDR Action Plan & State of Play • EUSDR Governance • Reports & Outlooks by DSP (EUSDR Implementation Report, Monitoring, SG DANUVAL, Communication Strategy)
1st EU MRS Week	17-21/02/2020 Brussels, BE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual meetings of the four MRS • Embedding workshops & EUSDR Task Force 'Embedding' meeting • The Enlargement Perspective of the Western Balkans and the Role of the Regions, Meeting of the four MRS Presidencies and Trios
1st Meeting of Chairpersons of the National Coordinators groups (TRIO Presidencies of the MRS) and the EC	20/02/2020 Brussels, BE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convened under the Croatian EUSDR Presidency • Proposal for establishing a network of the National Coordination groups (TRIO Presidencies of the macro-regional strategies) and the European Commission: topics/themes for discussions and technical setup
HLG Meeting	21/02/2020 Brussels, BE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual meeting of the High Level Group (HLG) on EU Macro-Regional Strategies, focus on European Green Deal and Embedding
NC Meeting	25/05/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New EUSDR Action Plan – recap of final steps & outlook • EUSDR Governance Paper • NC Rules of Procedure • Embedding • DTP – 2nd PAC Call
2nd Meeting of Chairpersons of the National Coordinators groups (TRIO Presidencies of the MRS) and the EC	17/06/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convened under the Croatian EUSDR Presidency • Embedding process for 2021-2027 and progress in the EU macro-regional strategies • Exchange on MRS collaboration support in addressing challenges related to COVID-19
3rd Meeting of Chairpersons of the National Coordinators groups (TRIO Presidencies of the MRS) and the EC	15/09/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convened under the Slovenian EUSDR Presidency • MRS seeking better governance support • Embedding process for 2021-2027 and progress in the EU macro-regional strategies – follow up from the 2nd meeting • MRS post COVID governance
9th EUSDR Annual Forum	22/10/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented under the Croatian EUSDR Presidency • Dedicated to harmonious and sustainable development of the Danube Region (ecologic, economic and social and civil perspective of sustainable regional development) • Instruments for financing the development of the Danube Region (Danube Transnational Programme, present and future: new priorities for 2021-2027; Meeting of EUSDR National Coordinators with Managing Authorities from the Danube Region) • Meeting of the Ministers responsible for the EUSDR
NC-PAC Meeting (informal)	27/11/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of the Programme of the Slovak EUSDR Presidency
NC Meeting (including TRIO-Presidency Meeting)	13/01/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EUSDR Governance • EUSDR Embedding – State of Play & Next steps • Future of DTP 2 – Support of the Programme towards the EUSDR • Report by DSP on Current Activities (Monitoring, Implementation Report 2019, Capacity Building, Communication)
2nd EU MRS Week	01-05/03/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation of Youth and Civil Society Organisations in MRS • MRS support to recover from COVID-19 • Embedding workshops • Individual sessions on EU funding programmes directly managed by the EC • MRS Presidency and Trio Meeting

Type	Date & Place	Focus
NC-PAC Meeting	02/03/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update from the EC on preparation of legislation, Embedding MRS, etc. • Revision of PA Roadmaps • Potential tools and activities for better alignment of the embedding process “From Words to Action!” • Better involvement of non-EU countries into the governance and implementation of the EUSDR • Update on state of play of DTP 2 with a special focus on support of the Danube Transnational Programme 2021-2027 towards EUSDR
HLG Meeting	05/03/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting of the High-Level Group on EU macro-regional strategies, focus on 3rd Commission report on the implementation of EU MRS, Council Conclusions, ‘Citizen’ Shadow Report’ of Civil Society Organisations, Embedding MRS priorities in 2021-27 EU funds programmes and role of MRS in securing a sustainable, competitive and socially inclusive economic recovery post-COVID-19
4th Meeting of Chairpersons of the National Coordinators groups (TRIO Presidencies of the MRS) and the EC	05/03/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convened under the French EUSALP Presidency • Work towards the embedding process • Inclusion of civil society • Enlargement process
PAC Meeting (informal consultation)	30/03/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collecting PA Feedback, inputs and positions on Roadmaps
NC Meeting (including TRIO-Presidency Meeting)	15/05/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slovak EUSDR Presidency – Current activities and outlook • EUSDR Embedding – State of Play & Next steps • Future of DTP 2 – Programming & Governance Support • Report by DSP on Current Activities (EUSDR Monitoring Concept, EUSDR Impact Evaluation, Guidelines on Strategic Projects & Processes, SG Needs Assessment and Needs Assessment on stakeholder management & engagement; DSP extension 2022)
NC-PAC Meeting (including TRIO-Presidency Meeting)	13/09/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slovak EUSDR Presidency – Current activities and outlook • EUSDR Embedding – State of Play & Next steps • Future of DTP 2 – Programming & Governance Support • Report by DSP on Current Activities (EUSDR Impact Evaluation, ESPON territorial scenarios 2050, EUSDR digital brochure)
10th EUSDR Annual Forum	26-27/10/2021 hybrid (Bratislava, SK & online)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented under the Slovak EUSDR Presidency • Dedicated to: Towards a green and digital Danube Region (the role of youth and youth policies; digital transformations and innovations; biodiversity – threats and opportunities; support to non-EU states & Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans) • Reflections of the 8th Danube Participation Day on Digitalisation & Participation • Danube Transnational Programme Annual Event • Embedding of the EUSDR into EU Funds 2021-2027 • Meeting of EUSDR ministers responsible for innovation and digitalisation
PAC Meeting (informal consultation)	09/11/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrap-up Presentation of the draft Guidance Paper for identifying and listing EUSDR Strategic Projects/Processes • Joint discussion to work on a common position on the open issues
NC-PAC Meeting (informal)	10/12/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency programme

One major step in the reporting period was the adoption of the **revised EUSDR Action Plan**⁶ as Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2020)59 in April 2020. It has been submitted to the European Parliament (EP), the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Committee of the Regions (CoR). The new Action Plan is the central Strategy implementation document, which streamlines, updates and adapts the EUSDR's priorities and focus, thus making the Strategy fit for the next years to come. The revised Action Plan brings the EUSDR forward by updating its targets and actions, aligning them with the coming new EU Policy objectives and thus providing space for embedding the EUSDR into the 2021-2027 programmes. The new Action Plan also places the EUSDR into a geo-political context and looks towards cooperation with other macro-regional strategies and other regional and international initiatives and strategies relevant for the Danube Region.

In July 2020, the **EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper**⁷, a jointly elaborated document which clarifies roles, responsibilities and interdependencies of EUSDR key stakeholders, was endorsed. The document aims at improving coordination and cooperation in view of further enhancing the commitment to the Strategy and its effective implementation and at supporting the development of the necessary administrative capacity ensuring that political commitment translates into effective implementation. In order to improve internal governance procedures and decision-making processes the **Rules of Procedures (RoP)** for EUSDR NCs and PACs were updated and adopted by the respective stakeholders.

Further key documents published in the reporting period were the **Joint Statement of the Ministers** responsible for the implementation of the EUSDR in 2020⁸ and the Joint Statement of Ministers responsible for Innovation and Digitalisation in 2021⁹ in the framework of the EUSDR Annual Fora.

At EC-level, the 3rd '**Report from the Commission** to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies' (COM/2020/578 final)¹⁰ was published in September 2020, followed by the '**Council conclusions** on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies'¹¹ in December 2020.

On **national level**, almost all EUSDR participating states have one or more **coordination mechanisms and platforms** for the implementation of the EUSDR in place. This can be seen as a reflection of the political commitment on national level, especially in the cases of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Baden-Württemberg, Hungary, Moldova, Slovenia and Slovak Republic with their high-level coordination mechanisms¹². For the reporting period 2020 and 2021, several platforms and instruments have been highlighted by the National Coordinators:

The Austrian coordination platform fulfils an important transmission function and involves actors from the national, regional and local level (PACs, SG members, economic and social partners and NGOs). In 2021 the establishment of a new national committee was decided, aiming at better interconnecting and strengthening the cooperation between MRS, transnational and EU-wide Interreg programmes and EU strategies for urban and spatial development in Austria.

⁶ EUSDR Action Plan, 2020. [Online](#).

⁷ EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, 2020. [Online](#).

⁸ Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, 2020. [Online](#).

⁹ Joint Statement (2021) of Ministers responsible for Innovation and Digitalisation of the participating countries of the EUSDR, 2021. [Online](#).

¹⁰ Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, COM/2020/578 final. [Online](#).

¹¹ Council conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, 2020. [Online](#).

¹² See [EUSDR Implementation Report 2019](#) for more details

In Baden-Württemberg, cross-sectoral and multi-level coordination of EUSDR activities is ensured through the appointment of the State Minister as Special Envoy for the implementation of the EUSDR with support of the Danube Service Bureau at the State Ministry. Inter-Ministerial Working Groups are the main coordination instrument. They involve all line ministries and sometimes invite selected project leads e.g. from the Danube Transnational Programme.

Bavaria focused on regular meetings of the National Coordinators with representatives from line ministries as well as Bavarian PACs.

Croatia strived to establish a sound national network of main MRS stakeholders. Despite the pandemic constraints, progress was made and compared to the previous reporting period, a more vigorous and connected MRS national community has been established at the level of central government actors. Also, the support from political level has increased, due to awareness raising efforts from the side of National Coordinators.

In Hungary, following the publication of the revised EUSDR Action Plan, a Government decision was adopted to revise and regulate the national EUSDR coordination. Rules of Procedure were prepared for the EUSDR Intergovernmental Working Group to secure a more formal operation and a proper information flow among the key Hungarian players of the EUSDR, managing authorities of funds and other relevant stakeholders. The representative of the Directorate of Foreign Affairs from the Office of the National Assembly is regularly invited to the meetings of the Intergovernmental Working Group.

In Montenegro, the European Integration Office together with representatives from transnational programmes and MRS regularly visits municipalities, in order to present opportunities provided within the framework of MRS and exchange experiences, needs and expectations.

Slovenia organised online meetings with PACs and NCs in order to exchange information on the progress made within the EUSDR, usually before governance bodies' meetings. The participatory approach of all target groups is practised through regular information sharing via e-mail, website and social media. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in its role as National Coordinator of all three MRS reports to the Slovene Government and the Parliament on the developments of the MRS every year. In this respect, also information on the progress made of each line ministry and other involved stakeholders is presented in the report. A lot of effort was furthermore put into updating the membership of Slovenian representatives in the SGs.

In Ukraine, a 'Coordinating Centre' for the implementation of the EUSDR was established. The Coordinating Centre is a temporary subsidiary body of the Government of Ukraine, established to ensure coherent actions by central and local executive authorities on Ukraine's participation in the EUSDR. In the reporting period, the work with local authorities in performing activities related to Ukraine's participation in the EUSDR was intensified and the involvement of potential stakeholders and civil society was increased.

2.2. EUSDR Embedding

As previous EUSDR Implementation Reports show, the issue of aligning EUSDR actions with EU programmes has been on the Strategy's agenda for many years. Already in 2015, the Network of ESF managing authorities in the Danube Region was established. The network that is coordinated by EUSDR PA 9 and PA 10 has been active since then, sharing know-how and experience to foster transnational cooperation between ESF projects and to establish close links to EUSDR structures.

With the beginning of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency in November 2019, the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan (as outlined above) and the transition towards the preparation phase for the upcoming programming period 2021-2027, the EUSDR embedding turned into a top priority.

In 2020 and 2021, intense efforts towards embedding the Strategy into national and regional EU-funded programmes were taken up with great efforts by all EUSDR core stakeholders. The following paragraphs give a brief overview on the main tools and processes established, such as the shortlist of strategic topics, the EUSDR embedding tool, awareness raising on national levels, or the establishment of ERDF/CF and IPA/NDICI managing/programming authorities networks. More detailed information and all mentioned documents and tools can be found on the [EUSDR website](#). The Annex I provides further information on funding sources and activities carried out within the Priority Areas and at regional/national level to ensure that relevant MRS priorities are included in 2021-2027 planning and programme documents.

Creating synergies between macro-regional strategies and Cohesion Policy was one of the priorities of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency. In March 2020, the ***Guidance Paper for Embedding of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) into EU Programmes***¹³ was published, offering comprehensive instructions for the EUSDR embedding process and the provision of three 'strategic topics' per Priority Area. Following the Guidance Paper, Priority Area Coordinators and their Steering Groups compiled a shortlist of three strategic topics per PA, based on the EUSDR Action Plan, to be included in the relevant national/regional operational programmes. National Coordinators (NCs) and core decision-makers of the Strategy screened the strategic topics for their feasibility and suitability with regards to embedding on the national level in consultation with the respective programming/managing authorities and endorsed this so-called '***shortlist of strategic topics***', laying the ground for further awareness raising on national levels.

To coordinate the implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan with the EU's priorities as well as the priorities of the involved accession and neighbouring countries for the financing period 2021 – 2027, a **Task Force for Embedding (TF EMB-DR)** was established. Under the Croatian and Slovak EUSDR Presidencies, facilitated by the DSP and supported by INTERACT, four Task Force meetings were held during the reporting period: in January 2020 in Vienna, in February 2020 in Brussels, in January 2021 online and in June 2021 online.

Following the outcomes of the first Task Force meeting, the DSP identified possible funding instruments for the actions of the EUSDR and elaborated the EUSDR '***embedding tool***'¹⁴ together with an accompanying ***sources document***¹⁵. In this comprehensive matrix, for each action of the EUSDR Action Plan and the shortlisted strategic topics, possible funding instruments are suggested and links to the Annexes D of the Country Reports 2019 and 2020 are provided. The embedding tool comprises dedicated sections for EU (e.g., EU funds allocated to Cohesion Policy) and non-EU countries (IPAIII and NDICI), following the principle of equal treatment of all EUSDR member states.

In the course of the 9th EUSDR Annual Forum in October 2020, the Croatian EUSDR Presidency with the support of DSP organised a **meeting of NCs with managing/programming authorities** from the Danube Region. The meeting aimed to facilitate exchange on funding programmes' support to the implementation of the EUSDR and initiate networking between national and regional authorities responsible for EU funds allocated to Cohesion Policy and IPAIII/NDICI funds.

¹³ Croatian EUSDR Presidency, Guidance Paper for Embedding of the EUSDR into EU Programmes, 2020. [Online](#).

¹⁴ EUSDR Embedding Tool, Annex 1a to the Guidance Paper by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency, 2021. [Online](#).

¹⁵ EUSDR Embedding Tool, Annex 1b to the Guidance Paper by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency, 2021. [Online](#).

The 2021 Slovak EUSDR Presidency continued the strong promotion of the embedding process and published a **discussion paper ‘From Words to Action’**¹⁶ on further potential tools and processes for embedding. Furthermore, the Slovak Presidency invited ERDF/CF managing authorities and IPA/NDICI programming authorities to workshops on embedding the EUSDR into EU Funding Programmes. To further streamline the discussion process, different networks with/of authorities responsible for planning and programming have been established. In 2021, three **MA networks** are fully operational, providing a solid basis for embedding activities and thus another vital pillar for the success of EUSDR implementation:

- ESF MA network (since 2015)
- ERDF/CF MA network (established in January 2021)
- IPA/NDICI programming authorities’ network (established in April 2021)

To support the process, the DSP elaborated and published a **Leaflet on EUSDR embedding**¹⁷ (the how, the why and the what) **for representatives of managing/programming authorities**, NCs, PACs and other stakeholders working on embedding into EU programmes.

In spring 2021, the DSP conducted **surveys** among the managing authorities (MAs), programming authorities and National Coordinators (NCs) of the Danube Region on programming processes. Based on the results of these surveys, the DSP designed an overview on which **Specific Objectives** are **covered by national and Interreg programmes**¹⁸ in the Danube Region. It further displays the alignment of programmes’ thematic priorities with the Actions and shortlisted strategic topics of the EUSDR.

In order to capture the funding programmes’ contribution to the development and implementation of the EUSDR, several approaches and information sources need to be combined. The consolidated paper published by DSP in October 2021 provides an overview on **monitoring the outcomes of the embedding process** in the programming and implementation phases¹⁹. It summarises potential steps and information sources and highlights the different roles of (EUSDR) stakeholders.

In addition, all four MRS cooperate on embedding MRS into respective funds and programmes. **Cross-MRS discussion on embedding** took place, among others, in meetings of the High Level Group (HLG), meetings of the TRIO Presidencies of MRS and the EC, during the EU MRS Week or in meetings organised by INTERACT. During the EU MRS Week 2021, the Slovenian EUSAIR Presidency together with the Slovak EUSDR Presidency and the EC organised a discussion on the contribution of EUSAIR and EUSDR to the implementation of the **Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans**²⁰, where a high level of overlapping between EUSAIR and EUSDR priorities and the Flagships of the Economic and Investment Plan was discovered. Both EUSDR PA 1b and EUSAIR Pillar 2 Coordinators presented their priorities. Subsequently, the Slovak EUSDR Presidency took this topic further at the EUSDR Annual Forum.

Next to these efforts on Strategy and cross-MRS level, EUSDR participating states also prepared for the 2021-2027 programming period on **national/regional level**. Examples of national/regional embedding efforts as well as first results can be found in Annex I.

¹⁶ Slovak EUSDR Presidency, EUSDR Embedding – From Words to Action Discussion Paper, 2021. [Online](#).

¹⁷ Embedding EUSDR into EU programmes (ESIF, IPA III, NDICI), 2020. [Online](#).

¹⁸ Consolidated Overview of Embedding Surveys of EUSDR MAs/Programming Authorities (ERDF/CF & IPA/NDICI) and NCs. [Online](#). & Results of the survey conducted among ERDF/CF managing authorities and National Coordinators. [Online](#).

¹⁹ Paper on Monitoring of Embedding the EUSDR into EU Funds and Funding Programmes 2021-2027. [Online](#).

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1811

2.3. Monitoring & Evaluation

Monitoring and reporting the progress and achievements at the level of Priority Areas has been on the agenda of the EUSDR since its establishment. Previously, the PACs were delivering reporting information to the European Commission (Questionnaire for MRS for Thematic Area Coordinators, every second year) and the Danube Transnational Programme (PAC Project Reporting and Additional Information Annex, for the 1st PAC call on a yearly basis and from the 2nd PAC call onwards every six months).

In 2020 and 2021, the DSP in close cooperation with all EUSDR main stakeholders developed a **new monitoring concept**, to be endorsed by the NCs in 2022. The new monitoring system, including an **online reporting tool**, brings together different reporting strands (EC, DTP²¹ and EUSDR-level) by offering one comprehensive reporting template reflecting the progress and achievements of PAs. The new EUSDR monitoring concept foresees that from 2022 on, PACs will submit their reports every second year via the new online tool. This will provide the basis for several reports and follow-up activities, i.e.:

- The EC will use the inputs for the preparation of the Commission reports on the implementation of macro-regional strategies (the previous reports can be found [here](#)).
- The NCs will be provided with a further basis for decision-making, gaining support for strategic coordination and for keeping an overview of the participation and achievements within the EUSDR.
- The DSP will use the inputs for the preparation of the EUSDR Implementation Reports (the previous reports can be found [here](#)).
- Furthermore, the outcomes of the reporting will provide data for future evaluations, give enhanced grounds for the DSP to support the PAs in a more targeted manner, etc.

The **EUSDR Evaluation Plan**, setting out the evaluation strategy for the EUSDR for the implementation period of the DSP, was established in 2019. In this respect, NCs and PACs together with the DSP had agreed on a two-step Evaluation Plan for the EUSDR: the first step being an Operational/Governance Evaluation (carried out in 2019) and the second step being a Policy/Impact Evaluation (to be carried out in 2021/2022).

In order to reflect the developments and processes that had taken place since 2019 (e.g. postponement of the adoption of the revised EUSDR Action Plan to 2020 and postponement of the implementation of the new monitoring tool to 2022), the DSP in close cooperation with SG DANUVAL and other interested stakeholders updated the EUSDR Evaluation Plan in 2021. Following an SG DANUVAL workshop in April 2021 (online) and further consultations via e-mail, version 2.0 of the EUSDR Evaluation Plan was endorsed by the NCs in May 2021.

Along with the updated Evaluation Plan, the Terms of Reference for the procurement of the **Policy/Impact Evaluation**²² were specified by the DSP in cooperation with SG DANUVAL. As a result of the procurement procedure carried out by the DSP, the consulting company Spatial Foresight - with long-standing experience in the analysis and evaluation of territorial cooperation and MRS - was commissioned with the assignment. The Evaluation answered nine evaluation questions structured along four themes: (A) implementation, (B) impact, (C) communication and (D) effects of COVID-19 pandemic, and will be finalised and published in 2022.

²¹ Other than PAC project reporting to DTP

²² https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/EUSDR_ImpactEvaluation_Final_report_220511.pdf.

Furthermore, EUSDR core stakeholders were in close exchange with **ESPON**, supporting the programme in the development of projects related to the EUSDR. In May 2020, the Draft Final Report of the ESPON project '**European and Macro-regional Territorial Monitoring Tool**' was shared, along with the access to the tool [MRS.ESPON](https://mrs.espon.eu). While the tool cannot monitor the implementation of the EUSDR, it provides territorial information by mapping spatial patterns and trends and linking economic-political dynamics and territorial evidence of macro-regions. It further illustrates territorial diversity, disparities and potentials, and positions each MRS in a European perspective.

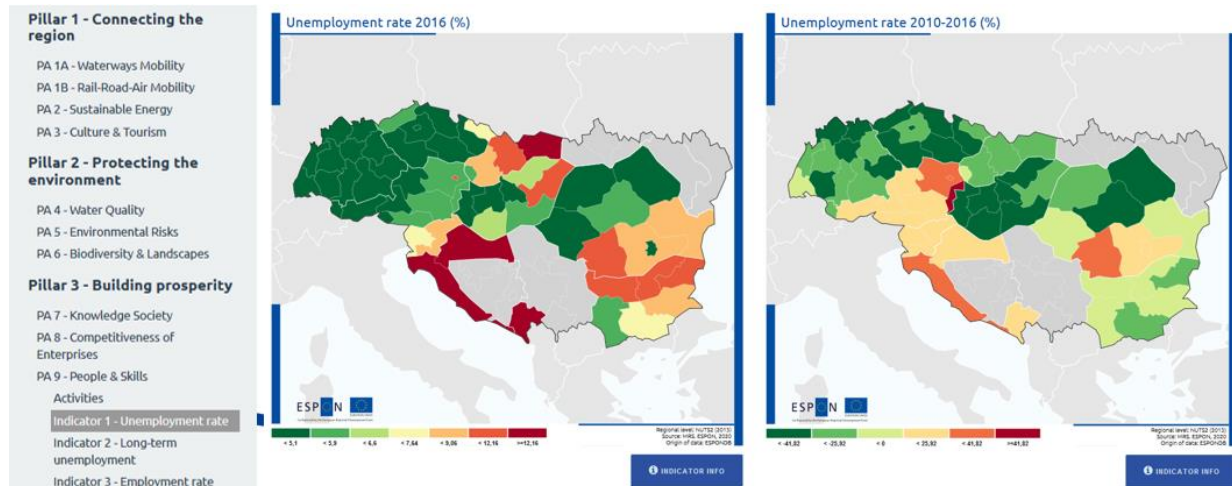


Figure 1: ESPON Territorial Monitoring Tool (source: <https://mrs.espon.eu/EUSDR/objectives/reports.html?id=142332>)

Finally, EUSDR stakeholders provided their expertise in the preparation and development of the ESPON project **Territorial Scenarios for the Danube and the Adriatic-Ionian macro-regions 2050 (TEVI 2050)**.

The main objectives and outcomes of the project are as follows:

- *Identification of the main processes, factors, obstacles and drivers that will shape the territorial development and spatial integration of the Danube Region and the Adriatic and Ionian Region in 2050. The common challenges identified in the strategic documents for each macro-region (e.g. demography, energy issues, mobility, connectivity, digitalisation, innovation and climate change) shall be taken into consideration.*
- *Identification of synergies and conflicts between the above-mentioned factors, obstacles and drivers (in particular, from the perspective of the key policy processes).*
- *Formulation of baseline territorial development scenarios for the Danube Region and for the Adriatic and Ionian Region for 2050.*
- *Production of alternative territorial development scenarios for the Danube Region and for the Adriatic and Ionian Region through a participatory dialogue with the steering committee and possibly involving other stakeholders.*
- *Development of policy recommendations on possible policy pathways i.e. policy actions requiring joint attention of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) and the European Union Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR) governance bodies and other levels of governance in the respective EU macro-regions in order to steer the development towards the chosen scenarios. In this case, soft cooperation and multi-level governance actions shall be taken into consideration.*²³

To ensure the participatory approach and the exchange between the project team and EUSDR stakeholders, three Steering Committee workshops took place in the course of 2021. Further, in June

²³ ESPON, 2020: TEVI2050 - Territorial Scenarios for the Danube and Adriatic-Ionian Macro-regions. Online: <https://www.espon.eu/TEVI2050>.

2021, the Inception Report of the project was shared, followed by the Interim Report in September. The project is to be finalised in 2022.

2.4. Strategic projects/processes (Flagships)

The EUSDR is implemented, among others, through strategic projects and processes. Previous efforts have been made to identify 'EUSDR strategic projects/processes', thus making the EUSDR's achievements more visible. However, according to the findings of the EUSDR Operational Evaluation 2019²⁴, there is still work to be done to communicate the results of the EUSDR to the public and the political level. Therefore, in May 2021 the DSP started the joint process of updating/elaborating guidelines for identifying and listing EUSDR strategic projects/processes in cooperation with the PACs.

Following a written feedback round, in November 2021 a meeting on the draft guidelines for EUSDR strategic projects/processes took place, to work on a common position among all PAs.



As different terminology can be used to describe projects and processes of strategic relevance, in a joint process of finding a terminology for the EUSDR, several terms have been discussed and assessed according to basic principles, pros and cons, and taking into account where and how the term should be used. Subsequently, the PACs selected '**Danube Strategy Flagships**' as the most representative and appropriate term.

Danube Strategy Flagships are projects or processes that contribute to the implementation of the EUSDR, have a clear macro-regional dimension and a multi-level governance approach. They are of high importance for the Danube Region's economic, social and territorial cohesion and for improving the quality of life. Danube Strategy Flagships strengthen internal and external communication of the Strategy and the visibility of the topics, initiatives and prospects in the Danube Region. They illustrate the progress achieved in implementing the EUSDR and demonstrate exemplarily significant improvement in the Region that is induced by cooperation.

The **Guidance Paper for identifying and listing Danube Strategy Flagships** is to be finalised in 2022. After its adoption by the NCs, the PACs will identify minimum one and maximum three Danube Strategy Flagships per PA per year. Following the Priority Areas' submissions, the DSP will prepare a list of Danube Strategy Flagships, distribute them among the NCs and other EUSDR stakeholders, and promote them as outlined in the Guidance Paper.

2.5. Communication

Increasing the visibility of the EUSDR and ensuring effective internal as well as external communication is a crucial activity within the macro-regional process and the responsibility of all EUSDR core stakeholders. Thus, following a comprehensive process of jointly establishing a EUSDR mission, a vision and a slogan, as well as objectives, target groups and messages, the most appropriate channels,

²⁴ Metis 2019, Evaluation of the effectiveness, communication and stakeholder involvement of the EUSDR. [Online](#).

methods and tools for communication were defined in the **EUSDR Communication Strategy**²⁵, which was prepared by the DSP and endorsed by the NCs in November 2020.

Vision	<i>Together we build a prosperous region with a healthy environment, equal societies and high living standards</i>
Mission	<i>EUSDR is connecting people to improve quality of life through sustainable development in the Danube Region.</i>
Slogan	<i>Danube Region Strategy – Prosperity through Diversity</i>

The slogan was also integrated into the EUSDR logo.

For a better implementation of the EUSDR Communication Strategy and a more effective promotion and communication of the EUSDR, the DSP has prepared a Communication Guide.

The **EUSDR Communication Guide**²⁶ is closely linked to the Communication Strategy, as it offers a set of tools and actions for its implementation. It also includes details on the usage of the new EUSDR logo and slogan and a narrative for the EUSDR.



Narrative	<p><i>Europe and its regions are in a time of transition. The Danube Region, like other EU macro-regions, faces challenges beyond borders – pollution, climate change, unemployment or lack of connectivity – that affect the lives of over 115 million people.</i></p> <p><i>Strategic areas as connectivity, digital transition, demographic changes or sound and democratic local and regional administrations need to be coordinated across the borders, jointly and with mutual interest to unlock the full potential of the Danube Region.</i></p> <p><i>To this end, the countries in the Danube basin came together and established the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), identifying common needs, challenges and opportunities that can be fully exploited only in cooperation to boost regional cohesion.</i></p> <p><i>All together, we need to protect our nature and people, to build a prosperous region with a healthy environment, equal societies and high living standards. We need to create sustainable jobs and open up fair opportunities – all the way between the Black Forest and the Black Sea. Environmental protection, sustainable transport, faster ITC connectivity, competitiveness of European businesses, security in the region need to be backed by sustainability, supporting circular economy and led by knowledge-based and information society.</i></p> <p><i>Our aim is to make our Danube Region stronger, more resilient and attractive to live in!</i></p> <p><i>EUSDR provides orientation for cooperation by offering an agile and strategic framework: platforms of exchange, guidance and networking, coordination of policies and joint actions far beyond physical and psychological borders.</i></p>
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²⁵ COMMUNICATION STRATEGY. EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION. November 2020. [Online](#).

²⁶ COMMUNICATION GUIDE for efficient implementation of communication activities related to EUSDR Communication Strategy. December 2020. [Online](#).

	<i>In the Danube Region people work together and jointly define ways to shape a joint future, in cooperation, on the ground for the sake of our citizens.</i>
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The COVID-19 pandemic restricted the physical participation in events. While these restrictions disabled the advantages of face-to-face meetings, they enabled a larger number of participants to join in on virtual platforms. Also, an increase in the number of regional, national and macro-regional events dedicated to the public authorities, funding programmes and the wider public was noticed in 2020.²⁷

The **9th EUSDR Annual Forum**, the main annual event of the Strategy, organised for the first time online by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency in October 2020, attracted 735 participants who attended the various sessions of the Forum. The event was promoted, among others, with a series of posts on social media and on the EUSDR website. As a follow up, the DSP published a summary report²⁸ of the event, which was also disseminated in an external EUSDR newsletters as well as via e-mail to EUSDR core stakeholders.

In October 2021 EUSDR stakeholders celebrated the **10th EUSDR Annual Forum** under the Slovak EUSDR Presidency. The event took place in a hybrid format: organisers, panellists and speakers were physically present in Bratislava, from where the entire Annual Forum was streamed. Other speakers presented their presentations online, and registered online participants had the opportunity to interactively participate in discussions through an online platform. The event was promoted via various communication channels and the summary report compiled by the DSP can be found on the EUSDR website²⁹.

The EUSDR Communication Plan for 2021 also included three main tools (a smart app, a digital brochure and a social media campaign) to support the **celebration of 10 years of EUSDR implementation**, highlighting the milestones achieved over the last 10 years. A special logo was designed for the celebration of the anniversary.



The EUSDR is the first MRS to develop a **Smart App** as a tool for external communication. The Smart App was launched in June 2021 for iOS and Android. As mass communication moved almost entirely to an online environment, this App provides real time information about the EUSDR implementation by activating notifications for each piece of news the DSP uploads on the EUSDR website. Events, key documents, reports and other newsworthy information are at hand for all interested in keeping up with EUSDR news and developments.

A **digital brochure** 'Stories that make us'³⁰ was developed, including interactive sections for the readers, like videos or documents (studies, reports etc.). Content-wise it provides a brief history of the EUSDR after 10 years of implementation, exemplified by relevant projects and processes.

Last but not least, a **social media campaign (#EUSDR10)** presented the best results achieved by the Priority Areas during the 10 years of EUSDR implementation.

Also, national levels were active on the occasion of the 10 years anniversary of the EUSDR. Examples in **Austria** are e.g. **public announcements by the Federal Minister for European and International**

²⁷ EUSDR Communication Plan 2021

²⁸ 9th Annual Forum of the EUSDR. Report. [Online](#).

²⁹ 10th Annual Forum of the EUSDR. Report. [Online](#).

³⁰ <https://danube-region.eu/communication/eusdr10-stories-that-make-us/>.

Affairs as well as public events such as the '**Danube Salon**' at the European Forum Wachau in June 2021. In addition, the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) dedicated the Annual Danube 2021 conference to the anniversary. Those events were organised in cooperation with Working Community of the Danube Regions (ARGE Donauländer) and the Federal province of Lower Austria.

Hungary published a book 'EUSDR 10 years after' to summarise the main achievements of the Strategy. The book was prepared in Hungarian language – with the involvement of the Hungarian SG members, the EC and the NC team – to reach mainly the Hungarian stakeholders and citizens, let them understand how the EUSDR is implemented and present the added value of the macro-regional strategy.

In 2020 and 2021, **Slovenian Television** continued its **media project** 'Macro-regions here and now'³¹, which was started in November 2018. The Slovenian National Coordination actively participated and helped to shape the course of the media project.

Further communication activities by Priority Area Coordinators, National Coordinators and the Danube Strategy Point are summarised in Figure 2 and below.

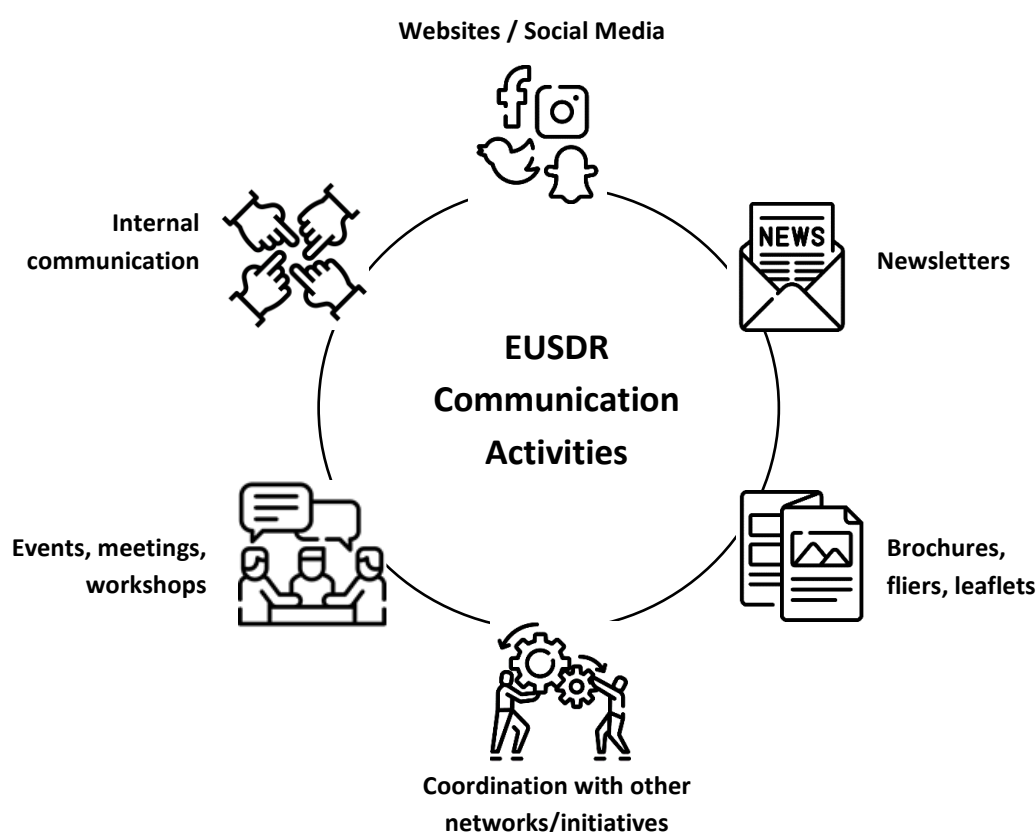


Figure 2: EUSDR Communication Activities 2020 and 2021 (Source of icons: Flaticon.com)

³¹ <https://www.rtvsl.si/tv/makroregije/podonavska-makroregija>.

Online presence and communication continued via the main EUSDR website³² managed by the DSP, as well as the websites of all Priority Areas³³. Most PAs have not only published their latest news on processes, projects, events, funding possibilities and publications on their specific PA websites, they have also forwarded information to DSP for dissemination on the main EUSDR website and via EUSDR social media channels. During the reporting period, the main EUSDR website registered an increase of 50,015 new users.



Facebook³⁴, LinkedIn³⁵, Twitter³⁶ and YouTube³⁷ accounts have been established and actively promoted the activities of EUSDR core stakeholders in 2020 and 2021. Two social media campaigns, dedicated to the revised EUSDR Action Plan in 2020 and the results achieved after 10 years EUSDR in 2021, attracted a large number of followers and, as a result, the EUSDR online community further grew considerably. In November 2021, the EUSDR had 7,298 followers on Facebook, 1,266 subscribers on Twitter, and 2,420 connections on LinkedIn. The EUSDR YouTube channel³⁸, as repository for videos produced on behalf of the Strategy, counted 54 subscribers by the end of 2021.

In addition, several Priority Areas have their own social media channels, such as PA specific pages and accounts on Facebook³⁹, Twitter⁴⁰, YouTube⁴¹, Instagram⁴², and they make sure to post PA related news on national websites, e.g. on ministerial websites. Similarly, the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK), the Government of the Czech Republic, the Government of Hungary and the Government of the Slovak Republic dedicate designated subsidies on their websites to MRS⁴³.

The DSP also organised an **online media campaign** that run from April to June 2021. During the campaign videos and animated electronic banners were displayed on 28 portals in the EUSDR participating countries, using Google Ads on news focus portals and on general portals (related to social, business, health, economic, culture, travel, tourism, IT&C, sport, transport etc.), together with Facebook pages of different news portals. The ten weeks campaign registered significant results:

- Google Display Ads News Focus - 17,298,492 impressions⁴⁴ (video + banner); 10,381,582 reach⁴⁵ (video + banner)
- Google Display Ads General (only banner) - 20,589,017 impressions; 12,400,333 reach
- B – FACEBOOK (video + text messages) - 9,478,897 impressions; 6,335,166 reach

The visuals displayed during the campaign were inserted in the web portals as hyperlinks either to the EUSDR main website or to the EUSDR Facebook account. This brought a large number of new visitors – for example during the campaign the website recorded 11,272 of 50,015 new visitors during the reporting period (see Figure 3 and Figure 4).

³² <https://danube-region.eu/>

³³ <https://danube-region.eu/about/priority-areas/>

³⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/DanubeRegionStrategy/>

³⁵ <https://www.linkedin.com/in/eusdr/>

³⁶ <https://twitter.com/eusdr>

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/danuberegionstrategy>

³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/DanubeRegionStrategy/>

³⁹ For example: PA 2, PA 3, PA 7, PA 9, PA 10

⁴⁰ For example: PA 7, PA 10

⁴¹ For example: PA 9, PA 10

⁴² For example: PA 7

⁴³ AT: <https://www.oerok.gv.at/kooperationen/portal-makroregionale-strategien/makroregionale-strategien-allgemein>

CZ: <https://www.vlada.cz/en/evropske-zalezitosti/evropske-politiky/podunajska-strategie/the-eu-strategy-for-the-danube-region-eusdr-151489/>

HU: <https://dunaregiostrategia.kormany.hu/>

SK: <https://www.dunajskastrategia.vlada.gov.sk/strategia-eu-pre-dunajsky-region/>

⁴⁴ impressions = the number of times the content is displayed

⁴⁵ reach = total number of people who see the content displayed (unique users)

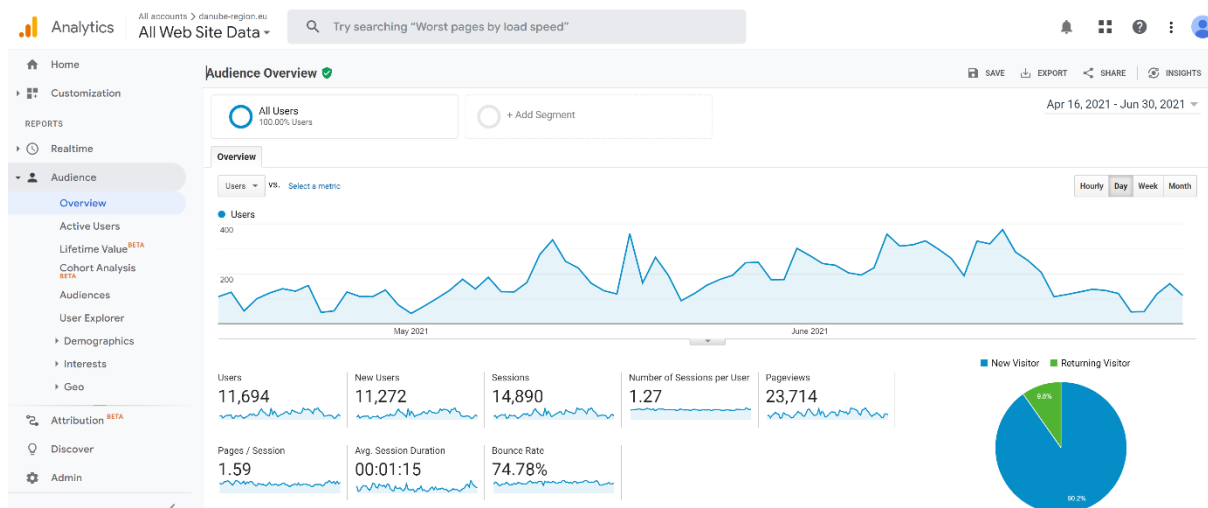


Figure 3: Number of new visitors during the online media campaign (Apr 16th – June 30th 2021)

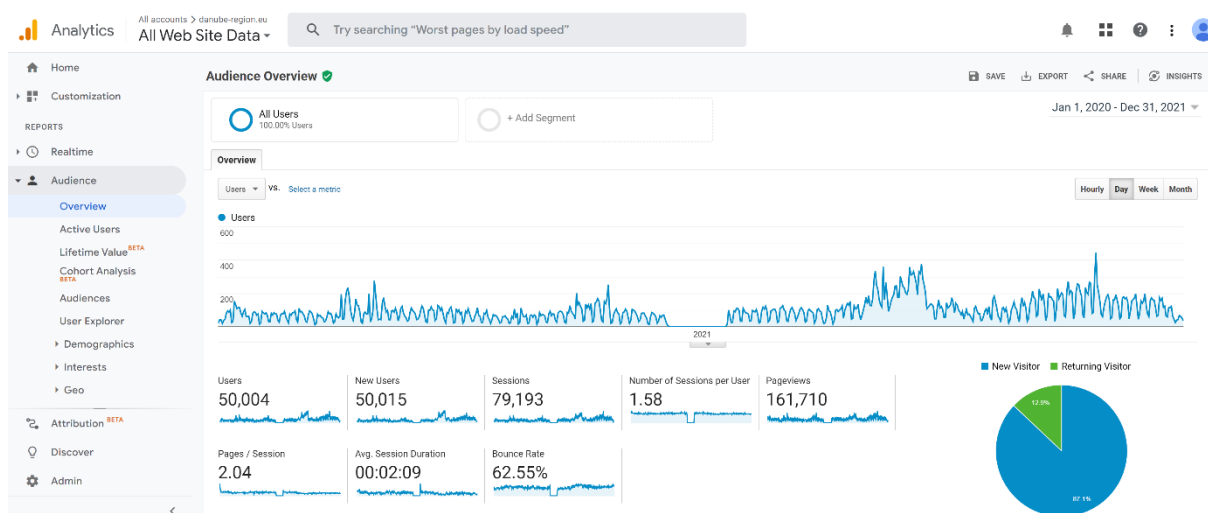


Figure 4: Number of new visitors during the reporting period (Jan 2020 – Dec 2021)



Within the reporting period six EUSDR **external newsletters** were edited and sent out by the DSP (April & Nov 2020 and Jan, June, Sept & Nov 2021). In November 2021, the EUSDR newsletter had 673 subscribers, of which 167 were part of the EUSDR governance. Also, specific **newsletters** were sent out by several PAs⁴⁶ and NCs⁴⁷.



Promotional **brochures/leaflets/fliers** were produced by several PAs⁴⁸. Furthermore, as stated above, the DSP published the interactive success stories e-brochure for the 10th anniversary of the EUSDR. In order to further support the ongoing embedding process (see chapter 2.2), the DSP prepared and disseminated a support overview leaflet⁴⁹ addressing managing authorities in the Danube Region as part of the external communication tools.



Within the reporting period several PAs **communicated and coordinated** their actions with **other initiatives and networks**. For instance, PA 9 and PA 10 highlighted their coordination with the Network of ESF managing authorities in the Danube Region.

⁴⁶ For example: PA 1a, PA 1b, PA 2, PA 7, PA 8, PA 9, PA 10

⁴⁷ For example: Austria, Hungary

⁴⁸ For example: PA 8 (digital leaflet), PA 9 (publication, in preparation), PA 11 (information material)

⁴⁹ Embedding EUSDR into EU programmes (ESIF, IPA III, NDICI), 2020. [Online](#).

Furthermore, several PACs and NCs reported on organising events, workshops and meetings that were used also as important communication opportunities. These include the 9th and 10th EUSDR Annual Fora (see above) as well as, e.g.:

- Danube Day in Hungary (online)
- PLANET 2021 Sustainability Summit and Expo in Budapest
- International conference on ecological connections ('Protected Areas – Corner-stones of Ecological Connectivity in the Carpathians and Beyond') in Visegrád
- International conference 'Future of woman entrepreneurship' (online)



Internal communication between EUSDR core stakeholders takes place mainly via e-mail and regular meetings (see chapter 2.1 on EUSDR core governance meetings). In addition, five **internal newsletters** were sent to the EUSDR core stakeholders in the reporting period (April and September 2020 and Jan, May and August 2021).

The **EUSDR Intranet** was presented in March 2021 by the DSP as a new feature, to make meeting documents as well as other information and reports as easily accessible as possible.

All in all, the elaboration of the EUSDR Communication Strategy and its implementation illustrate well how communication capacities have been strengthened and extended during the reporting period, despite the restrictions caused by COVID-19. In the next section an overview is presented on how organisational capacity was strengthened within the EUSDR and across MRS in 2020 and 2021.

2.6. Capacity Building

Capacity building comprises activities that impact both directly and indirectly the implementing capacity of the EUSDR stakeholders. The manifold capacity building activities within the EUSDR can be divided into EUSDR internal capacity building and capacity building across macro-regional strategies.

As for **internal capacity building**, activities include events and workshops dedicated to the EUSDR stakeholders, publications as well as targeted sessions and events delivered by the DSP upon request such as the '*Unfolding EUSDR*' workshops.

In the framework of strengthening the EUSDR core governance and in particular the EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators, two workshops were held in the reporting period:

- In October 2020, DSP with the support of INTERACT organised a training session intended to support **decision-making in an online environment**. During this workshop, approximately 30 PACs and their team members together with the DSP and INTERACT explored tips and practical ideas on how to prepare an online decision-making process as well as how to effectively implement an online decision-making process.
- In January 2021, DSP and INTERACT invited PACs and their teams to an online workshop '**Let's collaborate for a stronger, more resilient and more attractive Danube Region: prerequisites for successful EUSDR implementation**'. The workshop was dedicated to identifying prerequisites for efficient and impactful PAC's work to implement strategic objectives and horizontal topics of the EUSDR.



As part of the activities and deliverables focused on providing support for the EUSDR core governance, the DSP elaborated the **EUSDR Needs Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs)**⁵⁰. The assessment presents an information dossier that facilitates knowledge exchange and showcases solutions on how to efficiently increase the participation of the EUSDR member states in the SGs. The Needs Assessment aims at supporting the PACs and NCs in further building up capacities as well as enhancing participation of the EUSDR participating states in the implementation of the EUSDR. The final report was published in February 2021.

Upon request, the DSP organised so-called **'Unfolding EUSDR' workshops**. These workshops are aimed at new stakeholders who join the EUSDR team as PAC/PAC team member or NC/NC team member, in order to harmonise the knowledge and capacities of the stakeholders, to gain synergies and reduce redundancies in the operational work. The interactive workshops offer an overview on *'the who, the how and the what'* and are tailored to the stakeholders' needs. During the reporting period, *'Unfolding EUSDR'* workshops were held with PA 1b, PA 2 and UA NC.

As for **capacity building beyond the EUSDR**, cross-MRS collaboration was further intensified with the support of Interact⁵¹. The Danube Strategy Point participated in all Working Group and Sub-Group meetings on common MRS capacities (*'Common capacity building support environment for MRS'*) as well as in the capacity building programme for capacity builders in MRS, which was established in 2021 (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Cross-MRS Capacity Building events facilitated or organised by Interact in 2020 and 2021

Type	Date & Place	Focus
5 th Working Group Meeting	23-24/01/'20 Vienna, AT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A shared MRS narrative and a building kit for specific messages • Roles and responsibilities of thematic coordinators and Steering Groups • ESIF support to MRS
6 th Working Group Meeting	01/04/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A narrative for macro-regional strategies • Interdependencies, roles and responsibilities of implementing stakeholders • ESIF support to MRS (embedding)
Roles & Responsibilities Sub-Group Meeting	17/04/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal of capacity framework (document) structure • Discussion on roles & responsibilities of stakeholder groups
Roles & Responsibilities Sub-Group Meeting	15/05/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion on capacity framework for Steering Group/Action Group member's function
7 th Working Group Meeting	18/06/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress made in developing a joint narrative and communication messages for the EU macro-regional strategies • How to bring outcomes elaborated by this group to the MRS discussions?
Roles & Responsibilities Sub-Group Meeting	30/06/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on draft capacity building "frameworks" (background documents for capacity building programmes)
Communication Sub-Group Meeting	10/07/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a video message supporting the MRS narrative, starting from the key message extracted for the main target groups
Embedding Sub-Group Meeting	10/09/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MRS selling points to ESIF mainstream programmes • ESIF support to macro-regions working paper
Embedding Sub-Group Meeting	27/10/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MRS embedding process – updates from each MRS
Roles & Responsibilities Sub-Group Meeting	12/11/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalisation of the capacity building "frameworks" (background documents for capacity building programmes)
8 th Working Group Meeting	17/11/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State of play and recent developments (updates from the sub-groups, meeting of TRIO-Presidencies and EC, 3rd report on the implementation of EU MRS, digital Annual Fora)

⁵⁰ DSP, 2020: EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Needs Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs). [Online](#).

⁵¹ Further information and most recent activities of Interact can be followed here: <http://www.interact-eu.net/>

Type	Date & Place	Focus
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plans for 2021: where do we join efforts?
Communication Sub-Group Meeting	17/12/2020 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State of play of the key messages developed to support the MRS narrative Joint communication actions for the EUMRS week in 2021
9 th Working Group Meeting	10/02/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> implementation formats in each MRS: concept and experiences Launching the sub-group "MRS implementation formats"
MRS Implementation Formats Sub-Group Meeting	17/03/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Common definitions (e.g. actions on the ground, MLG engagement etc.) Input paper on MRS implementation formats
Embedding Sub-Group Meeting	30/03/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update on embedding process in each MRS MA Network experience Ideas for further discussions
MRS Implementation Formats Sub-Group Meeting	26/04/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback on the draft Input paper on MRS implementation formats Core points to guide thematic area coordinators and policy-action process leaders in assessing progress made in a 'policy-action process'
MRS Implementation Formats Sub-Group Meeting	07/06/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy-action processes in today's MR, practices, challenges and concerns on the ground
10 th Working Group Meeting	08/09/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The policy-action process to deliver unique macro-regional value-added: presentation of an input paper MRS Monitoring and Evaluation system: process and content proposals Capacity building programme for capacity builders (MRS Support Units)
Capacity building programme for capacity builders in MRS	04/11/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module 1: MRS as frameworks for long-term strategic collaboration
Capacity building programme for capacity builders in MRS	29-30/11/'21 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module 2: MRS as a complex multi-agent system
Embedding Sub-Group Meeting	02/12/2021 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update from MRS on embedding progress and focus activities Learn more about Action Lab for EUSAIR ETC managing authorities Synchronised call organisation: experience from Innovation Express 2021

Within the EUSDR, seven of fourteen countries are also part of two of the other three MRS (see Table 3), which makes cross-MRS coordination easier in these cases.

Table 3: Participation of EUSDR countries in other MRS

EUSDR→ OTHER MRS↓	AT	BA	DE (BW & BY)	HR	ME	RS	SI
EUSAIR		●		●	●	●	●
EUSALP	●		●				●
EUSBSR							

In the cases of Austria, Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, for example, participation in the EUSDR and EUSALP is closely coordinated, since in all three cases the responsibilities for national coordination of both strategies lie in the same unit. In Croatia the same National Coordinator is responsible for the EUSDR and EUSAIR, as is also the case in Montenegro for the Deputy National Coordinator. Slovenia is a special case as it is part of three MRS - EUSDR, EUSAIR and EUSALP – with one National Coordinator responsible for all three MRS.

A major cross-MRS event in Slovenia is the annual **Mediterranean Coast and EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week**, organised by the Municipality of Izola together with Ministry of Foreign Affairs and several other ministries, to bring together Slovenian MRS Implementers from different sectors and all levels of governance as well as entrepreneurs, civil society and youth representatives and social activists. In September 2020 during the 5th Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week⁵², which was one of the key events during Slovenia's Presidency of EUSAIR, Slovenia hosted the 3rd meeting of the TRIO Presidencies of all MRS. One of the main topics was MRS governance support, where the input paper from the cross-MRS Working Group 'Common capacity building support environment for MRS' was discussed. The 6th edition of the event⁵³ was held in November 2021, addressing current challenges and future potentials of the Adriatic Sea and Coast.

During the Croatian EUSDR Presidency the first **meeting of chairpersons of MRS TRIO Presidencies and the European Commission** was organised, as a platform for structured and continued exchanges, strengthened coordination and streamlining of approaches to processes and horizontal topics relevant for all macro-regions. In the reporting period, in total four meetings were held: in February 2020 in Brussels, in June 2020 online, in September 2020 online and in March 2021 online.

For the first time, the **EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week** took place in February 2020 in Brussels, hosted by the EC/DG REGIO. A number of events gathered key implementers of all four macro-regional strategies to discuss their future in line with the priorities of the EC. The second EU MRS Week was held in March 2021 online (see Table 1 for further information).

2.7. Youth involvement

The involvement of present and future generations in the shaping of our societies is high on the political agenda on a local, regional, national and European level. The revised EUSDR Action Plan addresses the strategic objective: 'Enhancing Democracy, sound Administration and strong Involvement of Civil Society and Youth'.⁵⁴ In doing so, the EUSDR acknowledges the role of young people in enhancing quality of life in the Danube Region.

This view has been further reinforced in the Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EUSDR at the Strategy's Annual Forum in Zagreb 2020, agreeing to 'take further steps to strengthen the support and widen the stakeholder platform, which includes a broad spectrum of actors, in particular better participation and involvement of the younger generation in the Danube Region'.⁵⁵

So far, the role of young people has been reflected in the numerous networks and projects of and for young people to promote cooperation and active citizenship in the region. In addition, several initiatives are more directly linked to the Danube Region Strategy or initiated by representatives of the EUSDR governance:

The **Guidance Paper for Youth Participation**⁵⁶ was developed in a two-year consultation process by EUSDR PA 10 in cooperation with the Danube Youth Participation Project, Danube Civil Society Forum,

⁵² <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/event/mediterranean-coast-and-macro-regional-strategies-week-2020/programme/>.

⁵³ <https://www.adriatic-ionian.eu/event/mediterranean-coast-and-macro-regional-strategies-week-2021-brings-new-dimension/>.

⁵⁴ <https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/EUSDR-ACTION-PLAN-SWD202059-final-1.pdf>

⁵⁵ <https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/EUSDR-Joint-Statement-of-Ministers-2020.pdf>

⁵⁶ https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/sites/3/2021/02/Guidance-Paper-Youth-Participation_Feb2021-LAYOUT.pdf

the Danube Youth Network, Agapedia Foundation and the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg. The document was endorsed and published in February 2021.

The **Danube Youth Network (DYN)** has been implementing transnational youth projects in the Danube Region since 2018. DYN projects, financed by institutions, cities and organisations, include amongst other exchange, learning and empowerment formats like 'Youth and Cities', participation in the EUSDR Participation Days and Annual Fora, the transnational media project 'Shoot by Youth' and the 'Friends of the Danube' youth camps.⁵⁷

In 2014, EUSDR PA 9 together with the EU SALTO-YOUTH Resource Centers South East Europe, Eastern Europe and Caucasus and the Interkulturelles Zentrum (as fmr. Austrian National Agency for Erasmus+) launched the **Danube Region Youth Platform (DRYP)**. The platform aimed at facilitating project development in the framework of Erasmus+ and other EU funding programmes to foster partnerships at the interface of education (formal and non-formal), training and the EU youth objectives.⁵⁸

For the past decade, the **Young Bled Strategic Forum (Young BSF)** has been bringing together young leaders from all over the world to engage in lively discussion and develop innovative solutions to some of the most pressing global issues. Young BSF has become a unique meeting place for a diverse array of young leaders, entrepreneurs, influencers, thinkers and social activists, offering them a platform to share their visions, exchange ideas and connect.

The Slovak EUSDR Presidency has put '**Participation of Youth in the Strategy implementation**' onto the agenda of its Presidency⁵⁹ and has designated the involvement of youth into EUSDR as one of the topics for the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum 2021 in Bratislava.

The SK Presidency and the DSP further initiated the **Task Force Danube Youth Council (TF DYC)** – a Working Group consisting of EUSDR Presidency, TRIO Presidency, interested EUSDR NCs, the DSP and EC. Additional expertise was provided by relevant networks and NGOs, such as Danube Youth Network, the Danube Civil Society Forum and Agapedia Foundation. The TF DYC was mandated by the EUSDR NCs to prepare and further elaborate the concept on the establishment of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) and the Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON). In 2021, three Task Force meetings were held online.⁶⁰

The **Danube Youth Council (DYC) is to be established in 2022**, as part of the European Year of Youth 2022. The DYC shall provide a platform for institutional involvement of young people in all EUSDR bodies to make ideas and viewpoints of young people heard and considered on a political level. The Danube Youth Council will be composed of 28 members, two members from each Danube Region country. The primary role of the DYC will be to provide the core decision-making bodies in the EUSDR with non-binding advice and recommendations, to enable dynamic exchanges and learning processes. The DYC shall play an important role in communication as well as providing a fresh perspective on programmatic issues. In doing so, the DYC shall act as a non-partisan body that contributes to improving capacity building, communication and cooperation for young people in the Danube Region.

⁵⁷ <https://socialngonetwork.eu/danube-youth-participation-2019-2021-danube-youth-network/>

⁵⁸ https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/sites/11/EUSDR-Youth-Platform-and-Initiative-2015_Short-Report_FINAL.pdf

⁵⁹ <https://danube-region.eu/slovak-eusdr-presidency-announces-programme-for-2021/>

⁶⁰ on 03/09/2021, 24/09/2021 and 11/10/2021

3. Developments and Achievements in Priority Areas

3.1. Pillar 1 – Connecting the Danube Region

Aiming to contribute to sustainable, inclusive and smart regional development through measures in the fields of transport, energy and culture and tourism, Pillar 1 of the Danube Region Strategy focuses on improving connectivity in the region. Joint efforts of the Danube Region countries in planning, financing and implementation have improved coordination in infrastructure works, operation of transport and energy systems, exchange of best practices on clean energy and promotion of Danube culture and tourism.



PA 1a Waterway Mobility

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

During the reporting period, EUSDR PA 1a focused on the implementation of the **Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan**⁶¹, which was reconfirmed in 2020 by the adoption of the **Danube Ministerial Conclusions**⁶², at the invitation of EC/DG MOVE and EU Transport Commissioner Ms Adina Vălean, and which have taken place every two years since 2014. The Transport Ministers of the Danube Region reconfirmed their commitment to implementing the Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan, keeping the topic on the political agenda and agreed to take the necessary measures foreseen in the plan. Upon industry stakeholder requests, a Working Group (WG) took up the issue to support Danube riparian states in the **optimisation of River Information Services (RIS)** in the Danube Region, which are essential for the safe and efficient execution of transports. Within the WG-RIS relevant national administrations optimise the service and implementation of **Notices to Skippers**⁶³ (NtS) whereby this service could already be made more user-friendly. EUSDR PA 1a further continued the roll out of **harmonised border control procedures and reduction of red tape** for Danube navigation within the joint WG Administrative Processes of PA 1a and PA 11. Border controls (only relevant at the external borders of the EU and the Schengen area) can now be made more effective and time-efficient by simplifying, harmonising and digitalising control forms (so-called **DAVID forms**⁶⁴) constituting a big advantage for the shipping industry. In sum, EUSDR PA 1a not only allowed the establishment of new cross-border networks and processes (e.g. between Ministries of Transport/ waterway authorities in different countries) but also of fruitful cross-thematic cooperation between Priority Areas (e.g. PA 11 Security and PA 1a Inland Waterways).

The PA 1a Technical Secretariat constantly monitors Action 1: Contribute to improve waterway and port infrastructure & management by aiming to **reach fairway depths of 2.5m** at Low Navigable Water Level in a harmonised and environmentally sustainable way. Actions 2 to 6 are qualitatively monitored (see Annex I).

Using the Danube Region Strategy framework, PA 1a aims to **fill gaps in thematic implementation** while avoiding to build parallel structures or duplicate existing projects, processes and initiatives. PA 1a

⁶¹ <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/documents/>.

⁶² <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/sites/10/2020/06/Danube-Ministerial-Conclusions-2020-annex.pdf>.

⁶³ <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/working-groups/wg-4-river-information-services/>.

⁶⁴ <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/working-groups/wg-6-administrative-processes/>.

plays a key role in addressing necessary issues that are not covered by (EU) legislation or that are dealt with in European/regional working groups or by other institutions. In this unique implementation way, the visibility of these issues can be increased and political relevance achieved.

Policy development

With the strategic implementation, PA 1a contributes to the priorities of the European Green Deal and the Smart and Sustainable Mobility Strategy. Policy stimuli are provided, for example, **by supporting environmentally friendly inland navigation** and by **publishing a policy recommendation on fleet modernisation**⁶⁵. In addition, PA 1a addresses issues of **digital transition of inland navigation** by further development of River Information Services (RIS) and the joint WG Administrative Processes of EUSDR PA 1a and PA 11. A main policy output of PA 1a were the 2020 **Danube Ministerial Conclusions**⁶⁶, which signifies a further commitment of the Danube Transport Ministers to secure proper waterway maintenance in their respective countries.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

The EU's involvement in the implementation process of the Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan enabled an **investment offensive**, boosting the realisation of the Master Plan, projects such as **FAIRway Danube**⁶⁷ and other EU co-financed initiatives. In recent years, more than 70 million EUR have been invested through EU co-financed projects within the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), the national Operational Programmes and the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) between 2014 and 2022. In concrete terms, this is reflected in **significant improvements in fairway conditions** on several critical waterway sections of the Danube.

The ERASMUS+ Programme was utilised for co-financing of the ongoing project **COMPETING**⁶⁸ (Competence Based Education and Training for Inland Navigation). The project contributes to the **implementation of Directive EU 2017/2397**⁶⁹ (EUSDR PA 1a, Action 5) by developing curricula and lesson materials, as well as a Quality Assurance and Quality Control (QA/QC) system, to ensure a smooth implementation of future proof inland waterway transport (IWT) education and training.

To continuously implement and improve **harmonised RIS** on the Danube and its navigable tributaries according to legal provisions on European level and to **ensure international data exchange**, the **RIS COMEX**⁷⁰ project was initiated. RIS COMEX focuses on the seamless availability and **easy-to-access relevant information** for fairway users and other logistics stakeholders as well as relevant authorities in order to increase efficiency of inland navigation based on existing infrastructure.



PA 1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

One of the main focal points of the EUSDR Priority Area 1b in the reporting period was the new **core network corridor Alpine-South East**. The initiative was already launched in 2013 and PA 1b actively

⁶⁵ https://navigation.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/sites/10/2021/08/2021-06-10_EUSDR_PA1a_Strategy_on_fleet_modernisation.pdf

⁶⁶ <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/sites/10/2020/06/Danube-Ministerial-Conclusions-2020-annex.pdf>

⁶⁷ <http://www.fairwaydanube.eu/>.

⁶⁸ <https://www.iwt-competencies.eu/>.

⁶⁹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017L2397&from=EN>.

⁷⁰ <https://www.riscomex.eu/>.

participated in shaping its content. This led to the result, that at the end of 2021, the European Commission included the corridor in the proposal for the **revised TEN-T guidelines**⁷¹ under the name '**Western Balkans Transport Corridor**'. PA 1b continues to emphasise the necessity and importance of this TEN-T corridor and has contributed significantly to its inclusion in the TEN-T transport corridors for the coming years. Hungary and Slovakia inaugurated a **new Danube bridge between Komárom and Komárno** in 2020⁷² and the Hungarian section of the Via Carpathia corridor was completed in 2020-2021⁷³. Another ongoing initiative is the **establishment of a rail freight corridor** connecting the Black Sea ports with the ports of the Northern Adriatic⁷⁴. Progress in terms of administrative and strategic planning is rather slow, but EUSDR PA 1b will continue to contribute to achieving results in the coming years. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, PA 1b switched entirely to online event organisation, which enabled to implement the planned events in full. A highlight was the meeting for the 10th anniversary of the EUSDR PA 1b Steering Group in June 2021. Since 2012, PA 1b assembles its stakeholders e.g. from the European Commission, academia, funding institutions, business representatives and interested general public to the **Danube Region Transport Days (DRTD)**⁷⁵ to collect input across the diverse participants, advance standards of best practice and enable networking. PA 1b implemented this successfully established conference format online with the support of the DSP in 2020 with the topic 'sustainable mobility' and in 2021 in the area of 'financing transport, transforming railways, cycling infrastructure'. With the annual stakeholder conference DRTD guiding principles for selected topics in transport are identified, while ascertain the current performance in these areas, and determining how the implementation of PA 1b towards its mission can be further improved.

Due to **insufficient financial and human resources** to comprehensively implement the EUSDR Action Plan, PA 1b does not use targets, indicators and an evaluation for the implementation of the PA.

With the implementation of rail-road-air transport topics in PA 1b, a particular added value is given in involving all countries of the Danube Region (EU and non-EU) in addressing transport-related issues in order to **develop and implement an EU transport policy**. The unique implementation here is to enable seamless, efficient and safe mobility of people and goods throughout the Danube Region and beyond.

Policy development

During the reporting period, the PA 1b succeeded in introducing the Western Balkans Transport Corridor into the revised TEN-T guidelines of the EC/DG MOVE. PA 1b also aligns its activities with overarching EU strategies, such as the European Green Deal (EGD). In addition, PA 1b contributes to the development of cohesion policy in the Danube Region whereby the Strategy can play a greater role in EU enlargement, particularly with regard to improving connectivity and reducing the backlog in transport services (logistics). In this respect, efforts have been made to integrate transport infrastructure networks in the Danube Region and to promote green corridors.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

In the area of EUSDR PA 1b, several transnational projects were finalised (CHESTNUT, CityWalk, eGUTS, RADAR) or continued (Danube Cycle Plans, OJP4Danube, SABRINA) in the **Danube Transnational Programme** during 2020-2021⁷⁶. Furthermore, projects in the transnational **Central Europe**

⁷¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12532-Trans-European-transport-network-TEN-T-revised-guidelines_en.

⁷² https://transport.ec.europa.eu/news/opening-eu-funded-cross-border-bridge-connecting-hungary-and-slovakia-2020-09-17_en

⁷³ financed by the Integrated Transport Development OP of Hungary

⁷⁴ https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/international-relations/enlargement/western-balkans_en.

⁷⁵ <https://transport.danube-region.eu/conferences/>.

⁷⁶ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approvedprojects>.

Programme were supported (CONNECT2CE, CROSS_BORDER, SMACKER)⁷⁷. The projects were integrated into PA 1b events, such as Steering Group meetings and thematic related conferences, to increase their visibility and generate interested stakeholders.



PA 2 Sustainable Energy

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

The most important achievement of EUSDR PA 2 during the reported period was a comparative **assessment of National Energy and Climate Plans (NECP)**⁷⁸ of the Danube Region countries financed by the EUSDR HU National Coordination. The study was commissioned with the purpose to evaluate the targets, measures and expected outcomes laid down in national documents, while focusing on the planned development of sustainable energy systems. Special attention was given to NECPs in the comprehensive thematic energy field of decarbonisation, deployment of renewable electricity, renewable heating and cooling, transport, energy efficiency in buildings, decarbonisation of the industry sector, energy security and the functioning of electricity and natural gas markets, as well as hydrogen deployment and market coupling. As a follow up of this study, PA 2 has prepared four policy briefs in the topics of electricity and, again based on these policy briefs, organised **two workshops**⁷⁹ on the four electricity-relevant topics of coupling electricity and gas sectors, natural gas, heating and cooling as well as transport. To summarise the main findings and results of the studies and workshops, PA 2 commissioned a **final study**⁸⁰ highlighting important and targeted policy recommendations addressing the most significant policy gaps that will unlock the transformation of energy systems and services in line with the Paris Agreement and keeping the rise in global temperature at or below 1.5 °C. A further major achievement was the continuation of the **subsurface energy storage** topic. In 2020 an **e-brochure**⁸¹ was published highlighting the needs and drivers for energy storage such as transition towards a highly energy efficient and renewable-based energy system, smart energy grids, advanced storage and flexibility technologies, backup generation and demand response as well as affordable and sustainable power supply.

PA 2 set up a **work programme** (roadmap) based on the EUSDR Action Plan with **dedicated targets** to be fulfilled and which is updated on a regular basis. The progress has been monitored by the number of deliverables achieved in the topics defined such as the assessment of National Energy and Climate Plans and underground energy storage within regular meetings of the coordination teams. Several studies were issued in these topics and seminars were organised with the participation of international experts. The Priority Area also communicated regularly its achievements and outputs and built an international stakeholder database.

The unique implementation objective of EUSDR PA 2 is to analyse and target, through energy related studies, reports, workshops and discussion papers, the **current state of play** across the Danube Region and the possible developments in terms of energy issues and **challenges reflected in EU and non-EU energy policy trends**. In addition, PA 2 thus offers a **unique multi-stakeholder and multi-level**

⁷⁷ <https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/Transport.html>.

⁷⁸ https://energy.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/6/2021/03/NECP_Danube_Region_REKK_2020_final_0215logo.pdf.

⁷⁹ <https://energy.danube-region.eu/pa2-organized-two-webinars-about-the-national-energy-and-climate-plans-of-the-danube-region-countries/>.

⁸⁰ https://energy.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/6/2022/03/NECP-Danube-Region-policy-recommendations_final.pdf.

⁸¹ https://energy.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/sites/6/2021/03/Energy_storage2021FINAL_03.25.pdf.

cooperation platform in this field, for example for the development of projects and international energy initiatives. One of the main topics of these collaborations is hydrogen. PA 2 actively follows developments in the field of hydrogen and supports international cooperation and knowledge exchange as key player throughout the Danube Region.

Policy development

One main target of PA 2 is to support EUSDR countries in reaching their national targets by 2030 in line with EU policies such as the European Green Deal or Fit for 55. In this context, PA 2 analysed in a study the NECPs of the Danube Region countries and the available policies of non-EU countries. Based on the study, PA 2 has prepared four **targeted policy briefs**⁸² in the topics of electricity, natural gas, heating and cooling as well as transport covering individual Danube Region national energy and climate strategies related to these topics as well as the expected developments in the Region. The policy briefs address the most significant policy gaps that will unlock the transformation of energy systems and services in line with the Paris Agreement. This should not only support stronger Danube Region climate ambitions manifested in the revision of national strategic documents, but also aims to ensure their delivery. It will further help non-EU countries to develop their own NECPs and thus contributes to the cohesion policy objective of PA 2 to support the **integration of the energy markets of non-EU countries in implementing the EU energy acquis**.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

During the reporting period, PA 2 continued to run successfully several projects from different sources of funding in their PA. The **DanuP-2-Gas**⁸³ project, implemented in the Danube Transnational Programme, connects to EUSDR PA 2 Actions 2 and 7. DanuP-2-Gas aims to advance transnational energy planning by promoting generation and storage strategies for renewables in the Danube Region by coupling the electric power and gas sector. Under the Interreg Europe Programme, PA 2 supported the project **SET-UP**⁸⁴, focusing on possible tools (also for policy stakeholders) for balancing power grids, mainly on battery storage and hydrogen. The project **V4 Green Universities (V4GU)**⁸⁵ was co-financed by the Governments of Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from the International Visegrad Fund. V4GU aims at contributing to the support of the major challenge of fighting climate change by awareness raising. In order to renew and expand the district heating service provided to residential and public users and economic operators using geothermal based, renewable energy sources, PA 2 supports the **Hódtthermal** project under the European City Facility funding programme.



PA 3 Culture & Tourism

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

EUSDR PA 3 in its role as PAC supported the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration in Romania in the **development of cycle routes** and in the selection process for the **development of cultural routes** in Romania and promoted an investment for the **National Plan for Reconstruction and**

⁸² <https://energy.danube-region.eu/publications/>.

⁸³ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/danup-2-gas>.

⁸⁴ <https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/set-up/>.

⁸⁵ <https://zoldegyetem.pte.hu/en/v4gu>.

Resilience⁸⁶ for the development of EuroVelo 6 and EuroVelo 13 routes in Romania. Further, a reform of administration and the certification procedure to this end was supported. In this respect, PA 3 organised a **workshop**⁸⁷ on the promotion of sustainable socio-cultural tourism via cultural routes and cycling routes. Based on the results of the previous Iron Age Danube project the **Iron Age Danube Route (IADR)** was awarded in 2021 by the Council of Europe as a new **European Cultural Route** including sites in 6 countries. Another important achievement was to put the needs in the fields of culture and tourism on the current agenda of state actors. To this end, PA 3 organised a post-COVID-19 **workshop 'Leave-no-one-behind'**⁸⁸, highlighting recovery solutions in the field of culture and tourism. This helped to gather best practices and solutions for the post-COVID-19 context, taking into account that tourism was the most affected economic sector during the pandemic crises.

The DTP PAC project of the PA 3 contains the main monitoring indicators for project implementation. Furthermore, the revised Action Plan for EUSDR PA 3 does not contain specific targets and indicators.

The EUSDR PA 3 unique implementation lies in **creating a common awareness** among the different stakeholders of the current challenges in the **combined fields of tourism, culture and people-to-people contacts**, raising awareness among these stakeholders and bringing cultural routes and cycle paths into investment.

Policy development

PA 3 in its role as PAC supported the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration in Romania in the development of cycle routes and promoted an investment for the **National Plan for Reconstruction and Resilience** for the development of EuroVelo 6 and EuroVelo 13 routes in Romania.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

During the reporting period, PA 3 supported three Interreg B projects all under the Danube Transnational Programme. The project **TRANSDANUBE.PEARLS**⁸⁹ aimed at developing socially fair, economically viable, environmentally friendly and health promoting mobility services for the visitors of the Danube Region. To improve the framework conditions and policy instruments supporting smart specialisation strategies (S3) for a new model of urban renovation involving cultural and creative industries is the objective of the **RESTART_4DANUBE**⁹⁰ project. Thirdly, the **DANURB**⁹¹ project focusses on strengthening the Danube regional cultural identity to create a common brand by fostering transnational cultural ties between the settlements along the Danube. As a continuation the **DANURB+** project started in 2020 to valorise the underused attractions and resources of shrinking places.

3.2. Pillar 2 – Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region

The Danube basin is characterised by complex and fragile ecosystems and habitats underpinning all human activities. Against the backdrop of climate change, sustainable use of natural resources and the overall preservation of the quality of environment in the Danube Region were identified as main

⁸⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility/recovery-and-resilience-plan-romania_en.

⁸⁷ <https://danube-region.eu/danube-events/workshop-on-promotion-of-sustainable-socio-cultural-tourism-via-cultural-routes-cycling-routes/>.

⁸⁸ <https://cultureandtourism.danube-region.eu/priority-area-3-eusdr-1030-1400-cet-post-covid-19-leave-no-one-behind-recovery-solutions-on-line-in-webex-platform-on-thursday-25-march-2021/>.

⁸⁹ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/transdanube-pearls>.

⁹⁰ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/restart-4danube>.

⁹¹ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/danurb>.

challenges. The Danube Region Strategy proposes specific cooperation activities for restoring and maintaining water quality, managing environmental risks and preserving biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soil. In 2020 and 2021 stakeholders across the Danube Region developed joint measures to protect and restore the quality of often invaluable natural assets, together forming a variety of interrelated and interdependent ecosystems. At the same time integrated activities were designed in order to prevent, prepare for and respond to natural and man-made disasters.



PA 4 Water Quality

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

During the reporting period, EUSDR PA 4 developed **coordinated activities dedicated to all EUSDR countries**, addressing the main topics included in the EUSDR Action Plan. For its main initiatives, PA 4 adopted a **cross-sectoral** and **multi-level governance** approach, with EUSDR territorial coverage. Recognising the importance **of waste water treatment** in the Danube Region and consequently the growing need for sewage sludge treatment and recovery, PA 4 initiated in 2020 a preparatory **study** dedicated to this topic⁹². The study was financed by the EUSDR HU National Coordination and provided an overview on the status quo in sludge management in the Danube countries, and included best practices and recommendations for future steps to be taken. In light of the conclusions from the above-mentioned study, PA 4 in cooperation with the International Commission of the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), the Danube Water Programme (DWP) and the International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC) organised in 2021 a **stakeholder workshop on Sludge management in the Danube Region for a greener EU**, with the assistance of the Danube Strategy Point. The workshop was awarded a Green Week Partner Event label. **A public consultation** related to sewage sludge was conducted in 2021 as well. Furthermore, a **study** on facts, activities, measures and their financial assessment in connection **with water retention in urban areas in the Danube Region**⁹³ was produced in 2021 and a **pilot research on micropollutants in the Danube** was conducted at five waste water treatment plants in 2021 in Hungary⁹⁴.

Aiming to play a bigger role in further involving the young generation in environmental awareness raising, PA 4 published a **special educational tool** – the Danube Cards⁹⁵.

The achievements of PA 4 were disseminated towards large categories of stakeholders. During 2021, a **short movie** introducing the activities and results of PA 4⁹⁶, a **leaflet on effective water consumption and drinking water quality**⁹⁷ and a **leaflet on water retention measures in urban areas** in the Danube Region⁹⁸ were produced. Besides, a **leaflet on migratory fish** was prepared in cooperation with the Danube Sturgeon Task Force.

Policy development

To support **policy development**, PA 4 contributed to the EU Climate Adaptation Strategy by filling in a related EU questionnaire and was actively involved in the meetings of the EU Water Joint Programming

⁹² <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/preparatory-study-on-sewage-sludge-management-in-the-danube-region/>

⁹³ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/water-retention-in-urban-areas-in-the-danube-region/>

⁹⁴ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/analysis-of-wastewater-treatment-plants-along-the-hungarian-stretch-of-the-danube-river/>

⁹⁵ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/sites/13/2022/01/danube-cards.pdf>

⁹⁶ <https://youtu.be/jfqY92aUFbQ>

⁹⁷ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/new-brochure-on-drinking-water-quality-from-source-to-tap/>

⁹⁸ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/sites/13/2022/01/Water-retention-leaflet.pdf>

Initiative Danube Region Working Group. In 2021, a **high-level conference** (*Climate Change Adaptation: Challenges and Opportunities in Water Management*)⁹⁹, supported by the Slovak EUSDR Presidency was organised in Bratislava. The main focus was sharing experience and best practices in climate change adaptation emphasising (green) water retention measures to contribute to better water quality in the Danube Region.

The Hungarian representatives of EUSDR PA 2, PA 4, PA 5 and PA 6 were present at the **Planet Sustainability Expo** (Budapest, 2021) and exchanged ideas on Danube-related tasks with the interested stakeholders.

Besides, the conclusions and the best practices presented in each of the above-mentioned studies serve as an inspiration for other Danube countries while developing policy documents and establishing cooperation structures.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

During the entire EUSDR implementation period, PA 4 had a **strong focus on embedding, funding and project generation**. Consequently, **regular workshops/meetings on the aligning of funding sources** complemented the detailed information on financing possibilities provided during each Steering Group meeting. In 2021, such a workshop was held in online format.

Furthermore, PA 4 was active in project generation and support: six Letters of Recommendation (LoR) have been issued in two years period towards facilitating the implementation of the objectives of the EUSDR Action Plan.

The EUSDR PA 4 relevant projects cover a wide variety of topics and use diverse funding sources, as following: macro-plastic waste management (**PlasticFreeDanube**¹⁰⁰, financed by Interreg V-A Slovakia-Austria 2014-2020), creation of ecological corridors and initiating protection measures along the Danube and its tributaries for the endangered species (**MEASURES**¹⁰¹, financed by the Danube Transnational Programme), improvement of the water quality in the Tisza River (**TID(Y)-UP**¹⁰², financed by the Danube Transnational Programme), innovative approaches in managing water resources (**Deepwater-CE**¹⁰³, financed by Central Europe Programme), and effective transnational control and reduction of the water pollution human sources (**Danube Hazard m3c**¹⁰⁴, financed by Danube Transnational Programme).



PA 5 Environmental Risks

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

Despite the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, EUSDR PA 5 continued its activities to **support project generation** and **networking** between stakeholders representing different countries, governance levels and thematic fields related to environmental risks. One of the main achievements of PA 5 in 2020 was the establishment of the **Disaster Management Working Group**. It consists of representatives from governmental and non-governmental organisations in the field of disaster

⁹⁹ <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/conference-climate-change-adaptation-challenges-and-opportunities-in-water-management/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://plasticfreeconnected.com/plasticfreedanube>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/measures>

¹⁰² <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/tid-y-up>

¹⁰³ <https://www.interreg-central.eu/Content.Node/DEEPWATER-CE.html>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/danube-hazard-m3c>

management from nine Danube countries and aims to extend their cooperation and joint efforts in order to reach a common understanding on regional preparedness measures and encourage standardised response activities. So far, the Working Group supported the implementation of numerous relevant projects, such as DiMaND¹⁰⁵ and PROFOUND¹⁰⁶ projects (financed by DG ECHO), RISKHUB¹⁰⁷ project (financed by SKHU INTERREG), PREP-R¹⁰⁸ (financed by Western Balkan Green Centre) and Wildfirex¹⁰⁹ (financed by the International Visegrad Fund).

A **study on Operative Flood Management Plans**¹¹⁰ was published in 2020. It presents best practice examples from Hungary, Croatia and Serbia and showcases the benefits of coordinated flood management and civil protection plans for the communities along the Danube.

The co-Coordicators and other representatives of EUSDR PA 5 ensured a **constant representation of the Priority Area in relevant events**, such as *DAREnet Annual Practitioner Forum* (2020), *Just-in-time training – best practices and methodologies in the medical, flood response and CBRN fields* (2020), *WILDFIREX Coordination training and meeting* (2020) and *the Hungarian National Conference for Celebrating EUSDR 10th Anniversary* (2021).

Additionally, PA 5 regularly disseminated information on the most relevant EU, national and regional policy developments, publications, surveys and events in its working fields.

Policy development

The policy document '**Revision of the EU policy instruments and their potential to contribute to EU droughts and water scarcity policies**'¹¹¹, prepared in 2020, represents the result of expert collaboration between the Integrated Drought Management Programme in Central and Eastern Europe and EUSDR PA 5. It aims to identify EU policies that might support the management of droughts. The revision of the policy instruments will serve countries as background for the integration of drought management into the most relevant existing policies. Additionally, it will support the development of a separate (new) drought policy with reference to the existing legal framework.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

During the reporting period, PA 5 issued 16 Letters of Recommendation (LoR) and six Letters of Merit (LoM)¹¹². Moreover, PA 5 contributed to the elaboration and on the implementation in 21 projects altogether. In the field of hydro-meteorological data exchange and policy, the **DAREFFORT**¹¹³ (financed by the Danube Transnational Programme) project was completed with great success to improve flood forecasting. The **LIFE-MICACC**¹¹⁴ project (financed by LIFE Programme), focused on the involvement of the local administration level in activities dedicated to climate change adaptation, made significant steps forward. Apart from the already mentioned projects, other relevant initiatives were financed by

¹⁰⁵ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/projects/dimand/>

¹⁰⁶ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/projects/profound/>

¹⁰⁷ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/projects/riskhub/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/projects/prep-r/>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3cCYvODRko>

¹¹⁰ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/sites/7/2020/04/Study-on-operative-flood-management-plus.pdf>

¹¹¹ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/revision-of-the-eu-policy-instruments-related-to-drought-and-water-scarcity-mitigation/>

¹¹² The Letters of Recommendation are issued for the projects under elaboration whilst the Letters of Merits are issued for already ongoing projects.

¹¹³ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/dareffort>

¹¹⁴ <https://vizmegtartomegoldasok.bm.hu/en>

HORIZON 2020 (DAREnet¹¹⁵), ENPI/ENI HUSKROUA (FloodUZH¹¹⁶, SAFETISZA¹¹⁷), LIFE (SandBoil¹¹⁸), Interreg HU-RS CBC (SafeForest).

Further strategically relevant projects were: WACOM¹¹⁹ and Danube Floodplain¹²⁰ (financed by the Danube Transnational Programme) and LIFE LOGOS 4 WATERS¹²¹ (financed by LIFE Programme).



PA 6 Biodiversity & Landscapes, Quality of Air & Soils

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

The **added value of the transnational and multilevel exchanges** is emphasised by the **results achieved by the EUSDR PA 6 Task Forces**. For example, illustrative activities of the Danube Sturgeons Task Force (DSTF) are: the publication of **DSTF Position Paper on Ban on sturgeon fishing in the Danube Basin** (2020) and subsequent coverage of the whole basin by bans adopted by States (2021) and the cooperation with ICPDR to mobilise funding for an Iron Gate study in order to establish preliminary design and budgeting for fish passage facilities (2019-2020). Cooperation between DSTF and ICPDR was also dedicated to the protection of ecological migration corridors, whilst the discussion with the EC focused on monitoring of sturgeon by-catch in Black Sea Fisheries and obtaining EU political and financing support the sturgeon conservation.

The Task Force for Invasive Alien Species contributed to **collecting and analysing relevant data on the invasive alien species** along the Danube River. The results were summarised in the Joint Scientific Survey 4¹²², published by ICPDR. Furthermore, the experts in this field exchanged best practices related to the management of invasive alien species during **online events** organised in 2021, such as the *Black Sea, Steppic & Continental (East) Regional Workshop, Joint ESENIAS and DIAS Scientific Conference, Ten years of cooperation and networking on invasive alien species in East and South Europe* workshop.

As regards the progress in the **soil protection field**, several achievements should be mentioned: the finalisation of a Master thesis on ecological indicators for hedge rows and the production of a video dedicated to hedge planting and hedge maintenance¹²³. Activities dedicated to soil data collection and soil quality were carried during the reporting period.

The gained know-how from **protected areas management** in the Danube Region and the transnational approach (**DANUBEPARKS**¹²⁴) has been systematically exchanged with other protected area networks. The continuous exchange of experience with ELBE PARKS, the Network of Protected Areas along the Elbe River, has resulted in the submission of a joint project in the Erasmus programme, with main focus on visitor centres, rangers and volunteers.

¹¹⁵ <http://darenetproject.eu/>

¹¹⁶ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/flooduzh/>

¹¹⁷ <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/projects/safetisza/>

¹¹⁸ <https://lifesandboil.eu/>

¹¹⁹ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/wacom>

¹²⁰ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/danube-floodplain>

¹²¹ <https://lifelogos4waters.bm.hu/en/home/>

¹²² [jds4_scientific_report_20mb.pdf \(danubesurvey.org\)](#)

¹²³ [UNSER BODEN](#)

¹²⁴ <https://danubeparks.org/>

Inspired by the success of the already existing structures, a **new Task Force**, dedicated to Danube Landscapes, was established in 2021. It provides a platform to follow up and enforce new global and EU processes related to Danube landscapes and enhance the transnational collaboration in this field.

Beginning with 2021, the Danube Region hosts along the Mura-Drava-Danube the world's first „**5-country biosphere reserve**“¹²⁵. Stretching across Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, and Serbia, the biosphere reserve covers a total area of almost 1 million hectares. Based on the results of COOP MDD¹²⁶, the **LIFELINEMDD**¹²⁷ project, both financed by the DTP, played an important role in protecting and restoring ecological connectivity in the Mura-Drava-Danube Rivers corridor through cross-sectoral cooperation.

PA 6 contributed to **fostering synergies across MRS** that focus on protecting the biodiversity. Thus, the representatives of the PA, participated as panellists in the INTERACT event *“The opportunities of the European Green Deal and the EU macro-regional strategies”* (2020), as organisers and moderators of the session *“The ecologic perspective of the sustainable regional development”* of the 9th EUSDR Annual Forum (2020) and in the international conference *“Protected Areas - Cornerstones of Ecological Connectivity in the Carpathians and Beyond”* (2021).

Policy development

By implementing its activities, EUSDR PA 6 showed clear contribution to the goals and targets of the EU acquis related to the Nature Directive, as well as to the EU Green Deal and its related strategies and plans. PA 6 considers that EU Green Deal serves as a leverage for countries for a sustainable green transition and the MRS could be used as tools to implement its objectives. When it comes to funding of actions and projects in the field of biodiversity in the Danube Region, it is important that all Member States prioritise these actions equally.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

The implementation of projects linked to and supported by PA 6 continued throughout the reporting period. Relevant examples are projects financed by the Danube Transnational Programme, such as **MEASURES**¹²⁸ (aiming to create ecological corridors by identifying key habitats and initiating protection measures along the Danube and its main tributaries), **LIFELINEMDD**¹²⁹ (focusing on improving the connectivity and biodiversity of the Mura-Drava-Danube Rivers corridor), **D2C DaRe to Connect**¹³⁰ (with activities dedicated to maintaining and enhancing ecosystems and their services), **SaveGREEN**¹³¹ (which demonstrates ways of designing appropriate mitigation measures and maintaining or improving the functionality of ecological corridors through integrated planning). Other relevant ongoing projects were financed by LIFE Programme: **LIFE WILDIsland**¹³² - Danube Wild Island Habitat Corridor and **DANUBE FREE SKY**¹³³ - Transnational conservation of birds along Danube River.

¹²⁵ <https://en.unesco.org/biosphere/eu-na/five-country>

¹²⁶ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/coop-mdd>

¹²⁷ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/lifelinemdd>

¹²⁸ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/measures>

¹²⁹ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/lifelinemdd>

¹³⁰ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/d2c>

¹³¹ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/savegreen>

¹³² <https://wildisland.danubeparks.org/>

¹³³ <https://danubefreesky.eu/en/>

3.3. Pillar 3 – Building Prosperity in the Danube Region

The Danube Region is often referred to as the most heterogeneous European macro-region. Its countries experience significant differences as regards innovation, competitiveness, education, the labour market and marginalised communities. Therefore, the thematic areas dedicated to building prosperity in the Danube Region aim at improving cooperation across the region by jointly developing projects for the improvement of social and economic framework conditions, such as stimulating excellence in research and development, strengthening cooperation between knowledge providers, boosting transnational cooperation between innovation and business and improving business support.



PA 7 Knowledge Society

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

During 2020 – 2021, EUSDR PA 7 continued to devote its efforts to developing the knowledge society in the Danube Region through research, education and information technologies. Thus, PA 7 **elaborated evidence-based outputs** and **proposed relevant measures** for the EUSDR academic and scientific communities, supporting rapid adaptation to health and societal challenges.

PA 7 contributed to the **joint EU response to the crisis caused by the pandemic**. In early 2020, its representatives attended a meeting of macro-regional coordinators focused on the common challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis. The aim was to mobilise support to effectively respond to the economic challenges caused by the health crisis and related preventive measures. Thus, under the lead of PA 7 and with the support of PA 9, an initiative focused on **digital education**¹³⁴, facilitating the **cooperation across macro-regions** was launched. On this occasion, good practices were collected and a brochure was produced. The initiative inspired the representatives of the EUSBSR to launch a special call on digital education challenges.

Also, PA 7 commissioned the study “**Evaluation of the Knowledge Society Development in the Danube Region for the period 2010 – 2018**”¹³⁵ in order to assess the status quo and progress in the area of knowledge society in the EUSDR. The study comprises recommendations for further developing the cooperation among the Danube Regions countries.

Furthermore, PA 7 offered **different networking and learning possibilities** for researchers, students, policy officers in the region. In 2021, an online Info Day and a virtual matchmaking event¹³⁶ were organised to provide the potential applicants or researchers with an opportunity to meet, discuss ideas for joint projects and build consortia.

A special emphasis was put on the academia. In 2020, PA 7 **set the first online public stream**, where renowned Danube Region researchers, scientists, innovators, and their topics of interest were presented to a wider public. Besides, the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research (BMBFW) and the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) honoured the scientists of the Danube Region for their commitment to their scientific work during the **Danubius Awards 2020 and 2021 Virtual Ceremonies**.

¹³⁴ <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/dtp-capitalisation-strategy/mrs-good-practices/>

¹³⁵ https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/sites/8/2021/08/PA7_Targets_analysis.pdf

¹³⁶ “Facilitating research and innovation cooperation in the Danube Region” within dedicated calls of the “Widening participation and spreading excellence” part of Horizon Europe

Policy development

An **Analysis of Participation of the Danube Region Countries in Horizon 2020**¹³⁷ was elaborated with the aim to contribute to enhancing the participation of Danube Region countries in the European Research Era (ERA). Two questionnaires were launched: one was addressed to the **policy makers** and the other was dedicated to **national contact points, agencies and/or applicants/potential applicants/and other relevant stakeholders**. The study highlighted the challenges encountered by the stakeholders, as well as the differences in the participation rate among the Danube Region countries. Based on the **recommendations for the EU and national policy makers**, more effective measures to improve the participation in the framework programmes could be proposed.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

20 mobility projects were financed under the **2nd Call for applications: Multilateral scientific and technological cooperation in the Danube Region**¹³⁸. On this occasion, institutions from Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Serbia and France joined to implement networking projects aiming to prepare project proposals in European and International grant schemes.

Other PA 7 relevant projects are: **SEED-Hub – Social Entrepreneurship Education and Development Hub**¹³⁹ (financed by Interreg Slovakia-Austria) and **TRESCA**¹⁴⁰ (financed by HORIZON EUROPE).

PA 7 fostered cooperation in the Danube Region at project level by bringing together relevant stakeholders to discuss in which way to contribute to reaching the objectives of green transition, circular economy, and environmental sustainability.



PA 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

Within EUSDR PA 8, the implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan continued in **five thematic areas**: *Innovation and Technology transfer, Clusters and Regional development, Digitalisation, Artificial intelligence and Female entrepreneurship*. The PA fostered **transnational policy and expert exchanges of EUSDR relevance**. As the topic of **bioeconomy** gained more importance, the **conference “Circular Economy – New Challenges for Plastics”**¹⁴¹ was held in hybrid format in 2021. On this occasion, participants discussed specific circular economy legislation aspects and exchanged good practices on the transition towards circular economy. In the same year, another **event** - *“Bioeconomising the Danube Region”*¹⁴² was jointly organised by EUSDR PA 8 and the GoDanuBio project representatives with the goal to stimulate the policy makers of the Danube Region to accelerate the process of defining the legal and strategical framework for establishing the process of bioeconomy/circular economy. The need to exchange on sustainable value creation in the Danube Region was considered when PA 8 and the Consulate General of Hungary in Stuttgart organised a conference in hybrid format, in 2021¹⁴³.

¹³⁷ <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/sites/8/2021/08/PA7-analysis-on-H2020-participation.pdf>

¹³⁸ <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/2nd-call-for-applications-multilateral-scientific-and-technological-cooperation-in-the-danube-region/>

¹³⁹ <https://www.zsi.at/en/object/project/5803>

¹⁴⁰ <https://trescaproject.eu/>

¹⁴¹ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/conference-circular-economy-new-challenges-for-plastics/>

¹⁴² <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/eusdr-pa8-and-godanubio-event-bioeconomizing-the-danube-region-all-stakeholders-hand-in-hand/>

¹⁴³ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/2416-2/>

Under the new circumstances generated by the pandemic, there was an **increase in cross macro-regional exchanges** as more partnerships were established and new initiatives were proposed (Innovation Express 2021¹⁴⁴). The same conclusion is valid for the exchanges of PA 8 with other PAs (e.g. the Joint Steering Group meeting of PA 7 and PA 8 in 2020¹⁴⁵).

In order to achieve a wider visibility among its stakeholders, PA 8 published a **digital leaflet**¹⁴⁶, produced and distributed a **newsletter** and constantly updated the PA website. An introductory brochure¹⁴⁷ of the EUSDR PA 8 Artificial Intelligence Working Group was published in 2021 with the financial support of the Hungarian EUSDR National Coordination. In addition, the coordinators accepted the role of speaker in various events, such as the international conference '*Future of woman entrepreneurship*' (2020) and the conference '*Women&Men in the Construction sector in the Danube region and beyond: Facing new challenges*' (2020)¹⁴⁸.

Policy development

In response to the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis, a **policy paper/study** was produced: '*Recommendations for Decision-Makers and SMEs within the Danube Region with regard to Economic Impact of the Corona Crisis*'¹⁴⁹. Its aim was to highlight the potential and the strengths of the Danube Region, as well as the most sustainable and forward-looking solutions to capitalise them. One of the outputs of the study was the idea of the EUSDR PA 8 flagship project "Danube Alliance for a stronger European Value Chain"¹⁵⁰.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

In terms of embedding, PA 8 initiated and financed the cross macro-regional initiative called "**Innovation Express 2021**". Four regions took part in this synchronised call and two successful projects were implemented therein. The idea of this unique initiative was further promoted on EU level as well as on state and regional level.

Apart from the above-mentioned initiative, two relevant projects, financed by the Danube Transnational Programme were implemented: **DanuBioValNet**¹⁵¹, which focused on developing new methods, strategies and tools to connect Danube actors (SMEs, farmers, universities, research institutes, etc.) in a bio-based industry and **GoDanuBio**¹⁵², which aimed at harmonising the national policies in the field of bioeconomy.



PA 9 People & Skills

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

Despite challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, EUSDR PA 9 has achieved further milestones in the implementations of its objectives. Through digital means, EUSDR PA 9 continued to provide a

¹⁴⁴ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/innovation-express-2021-call-for-proposals/>

¹⁴⁵ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/joint-pa7pa8-steering-group-meeting-3rd-june-2020/>

¹⁴⁶ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/new-priority-area-8-digital-leaflet/>

¹⁴⁷ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/introductory-brochure-of-the-pa8-artificial-intelligence-working-group/>

¹⁴⁸ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/online-conference-womenmen-in-the-construction-sector-in-the-danube-region-and-beyond-facing-new-challenges/>

¹⁴⁹ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/sites/4/2021/01/Recommendations-Corona.pdf>

¹⁵⁰ <https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/danube-alliance/>

¹⁵¹ <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/danubiovalnet>

¹⁵² <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/godanubio>

platform for exchange and policy dialogue for all its relevant stakeholders from the entire Danube Region, including on national approaches and good practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁵³. This Priority Area **enhanced cooperation among all partners** and maintained its network of relevant stakeholders through **Steering Group meetings, Stakeholder Conferences, thematic conferences** and the **promotion of projects and initiatives** under the umbrella of PA 9.

Thus, the 8th International Stakeholder Conference (2020)¹⁵⁴, entitled '*Smart and Social Responses to the Crisis: How Education, Training and Labour Market Policies can Contribute towards a Resilient Danube Region*' facilitated the exchange on solutions for building resilient education systems and labour markets in the context of the risk of an increased digital divide. The 9th Stakeholder Conference¹⁵⁵ '*A Resilient Danube Region through Digitalisation, Inclusion and Education*' (2021) was an online event which fostered exchanges on the promotion of digital skills and competencies in the Danube Region, ways to ensure equal opportunities and inclusion and enhance cooperation between vocational education and training and the labour market in the Danube Region.

Two editions of the **thematic conference** '*School cooperation in the Danube Region*' were held online in 2020¹⁵⁶, and respectively 2021¹⁵⁷, to promote the development of school cooperation projects in the region.

EUSDR PA 9 continued its efforts to develop further the '**Danube Region Monitor - People and Skills**'¹⁵⁸, an evidence-based monitoring tool that was created in order to inform decision-makers about recent developments and trends in the area of labour market and education in the Danube Region countries. An updated report and online database will be published in 2022.

A **Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence** was launched by PA 9 together with the European Training Foundation (ETF)¹⁵⁹. The platform allows for exchange between representatives from Danube Region countries, the European Commission, PA 9 and ETF. Its thematic focus lies on vocational excellence in the areas of going green and social innovation.

Policy development

Macro-regional cooperation within the EUSDR provides an important contribution to key EU policy priorities, including the European Green Deal and digital transition. PA 9 **promotes exchange and initiatives on digital and green skills and jobs** in the Danube Region. The EUSDR also effectively addresses the **heterogeneity of the Danube Region in the context of social cohesion**. The inclusion of **disadvantaged groups** is at the centre of the work of PA 9 as well.

The EUSDR further plays an important **role in the EU Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy**, as it enables collaboration between EU Member States and non-EU countries on an equal footing. In the case of PA 9, this collaboration includes the sharing of the PA coordination role between Austria, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, which is in itself a significant added value.

¹⁵³ This includes, in the area of education, the collection of good practice examples on homeschooling and digital education across all MRS, initiated by PA 7 with the support of PA 9: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/homeschooling/>

¹⁵⁴ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/8th-international-stakeholder-conference/>

¹⁵⁵ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/9th-stakeholder-conference/>

¹⁵⁶ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/thematic-conference-school-cooperation-in-the-danube-region-online-edition/>

¹⁵⁷ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/online-thematic-conference-school-cooperation-in-the-danube-region/>

¹⁵⁸ The first 2019 report can be downloaded on the PA9 website: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/danube-region-monitor-people-skills/>

¹⁵⁹ More information on the kick-off event is available here: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/kick-off-danube-region-platform-on-centres-of-vocational-excellence/>

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

The **ESF Management Authorities network**¹⁶⁰ has continued its work towards embedding the EUSDR in the European Social Fund (ESF), i.e. working on a common text module for transnational elements in the national operational programmes and on identifying common topics for transnational cooperation in the Danube Region. Stemming from the ESF MA network, the EaSI-project '*Social Innovation Plus (SI PLUS)*' has been launched for the establishment of National Competence Centres for Social Innovation in Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria, with associated partners in Baden-Württemberg, Slovenia and Croatia.

The implementation of the following projects is linked to and supported by PA 9: **DigiMe – Digital and Media Competence for Pupils and Teachers**¹⁶¹ (financed by Interreg AT-CZ), **Inclusive Education in the Region Odesa**¹⁶² (national funding, Austria - activities implemented in Ukraine), **COOP-NET**¹⁶³ (national funding, Austria – activities implemented in the Republic of Moldova), **EQET SEE – Enhancements in Quality of Education and Training in South Eastern Europe**¹⁶⁴ (financed by the Austrian Development Agency (national), and co-financed by ERI SEE), and **Digital Danube Network**¹⁶⁵ (national funding, Austria).

3.4. Pillar 4 – Strengthening the Danube Region

Danube Region countries share the goal of improving the functioning of democratic institutions, public administrations and central, regional and local organisations to provide a safer and more secure environment for their citizens. To reach this goal, joint actions focus on improving political, civil and administrative structures, multi-level governance mechanisms, facilitating administrative cooperation of cross-border communities as well as on fighting against corruption and organised crime.



PA 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

In 2019, EUSDR PA 10 launched the process of drafting the **Guidance Paper for Youth Involvement**¹⁶⁶. The Guidance Paper provides concrete proposals to support youth involvement in the implementation of the Danube Strategy and within the overall regional development in the Danube Region. The content of the paper is a result of a multi-level stakeholder dialogue that took place at different stages of drafting the paper and draws from the experiences of youth organisations in the Danube Region (e.g. members of the Danube Youth Network¹⁶⁷), the EC and stakeholders that drafted the EC Youth Manifesto¹⁶⁸. The Guidance Paper is further accompanied by activities addressing youth, such as the

¹⁶⁰ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/esf/>

¹⁶¹ <https://digiskillsmap.com/en/projects/digime-digital-media-competence-for-pupils-and-teachers>

¹⁶² <https://oead.at/en/cooperations/educational-cooperation-with-eastern-and-south-eastern-europe/educational-cooperation-partner-countries/ukraine>

¹⁶³ <https://oead.at/en/news/article/2021/11/neues-oead-projekt-coop-net-in-der-republik-moldau>

¹⁶⁴ <https://www.erisee.org/a-new-regional-project-eqet-see-started/>

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.oegb.at/didanet-en>

¹⁶⁶ <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/activities/guidance-paper-for-youth-participation/>

¹⁶⁷ <https://m.facebook.com/DanubeYouthNetwork>

¹⁶⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/publications/brochures/2020/manifesto-for-young-people-by-young-people-to-shape-the-european-cooperation-policy_en

Young Bled Strategic Forum¹⁶⁹, and prompted a cross-MRS exchange with EUSAIR. The since 2015 existing **Network of ESF managing authorities in the Danube Region**¹⁷⁰ managed to further develop in view of the new funding period 2021-2027 as the coordination teams of EUSDR PA 9 *People and Skills* and PA 10 *Institutional Capacities and Cooperation* worked together with the ESF+ managing authorities in the Danube Region to formulate a text module on macro-regional cooperation in the Operational Programmes. Likewise, the network defined eight topics for transnational cooperation in the ESF+ within the Danube Region. In addition, the network discussed geographic coverage and concrete topics for thematic cooperation in preparation to define concrete steps and formats for transnational cooperation (e.g. through calls, capitalisation activities, good practice exchange etc.).

PA 10 has **established targets for each action** of the EUSDR Action Plan, which are monitored, and the progress of the actions is discussed in the Steering Group meetings. Some targets refer to the establishment of collaboration formats such as exchange with funding instruments or cooperation platforms with civil society organisations and sub-national stakeholders (Danube Local Actors Platform¹⁷¹). Other targets are addressing strategic guidance such as policy guidance for co-designing policies or youth involvement. As for the **assessment criteria**, it is first assessed whether the targets could be established or not, in order to then setting up networks or elaborating strategic guidance with defining objectives (for networks) or tasks (for strategic guidance). In addition, some targets such as the organisation of National Participation Days¹⁷², Young Bled Strategic Forum and Bled Strategic Forum are assessed on an annual basis in view of how regular these events take place.

By building **long-term and sustainable stakeholder networks** (creating a cross-border and cross-sectoral mosaic of expertise) and not only individually implemented activities, PA 10 lays the unique groundwork to have the potential for further collaboration, value creation and wealth creation in the implementation of the EUSDR. The core of activities, capacity buildings and consultations are improved institutional capabilities and skilled individuals and/or organisations who have the ability to **create innovative and inclusive public services**, are **empowered to become more active citizens** and stakeholders, together **contributing to a more prosperous and open Danube Region** in the medium and long term period.

Policy development

In preparation to the European Year of Youth 2022, PA 10 continued its long-standing work in this thematic field through strategical support for the **participation of young generations** (through discussions, implemented projects, policy creation, Guidance paper on Youth Participation) resulting in the **identification and advocacy for stronger support and involvement of youth** in the EUSDR, which is currently implemented and discussed within the Danube Youth Council (DYC)¹⁷³ Task Force towards the **institutionalisation of the Danube Youth Council** and Danube Network of Youth Organisations (DYON) as integral parts of the EUSDR governance structure. The DYC Task Force includes dedicated key stakeholders from the EUSDR (NCs and PACs) and representatives from the EC/DG REGIO.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

The annual **Young Bled Strategic Forum** (BSF) was again successfully organised by PA 10 during the reporting period providing a unique meeting place for a diverse array of young leaders, entrepreneurs,

¹⁶⁹ <https://www.youngbledstrategicforum.org/>.

¹⁷⁰ <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/partnerships-danube-strategy-institutional-capacity/esf-network-danube-region/>.

¹⁷¹ <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/danube-local-actors-platform/>.

¹⁷² <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/participation-day/national-participation-days/>.

¹⁷³ <https://danube-region.eu/danube-youth-council/>.

influencers, thinkers and social activists and offering them a platform to share their visions, exchange ideas and connect. The Young BSF empowers young leaders to engage in lively discussions and develop innovative solutions to some of the most pressing global issues with decision-makers, representatives of international organisations, media, representatives of academia, members of the private sector and other stakeholders. The **Danube Participation Day**¹⁷⁴ is a further annual interactive conference and capacity building event organised back to back with the EUSDR Annual Forum in a live or virtual setting, focusing on a specific topic of discussion. Within the reporting period, the Danube Participation Days were devoted to the topic of Youth participation within EUSDR and the digitalisation and participation, focusing on e-governance and the digitalisation of public services within the Danube Region. The format presents a unique method for the participation of various stakeholders within the EUSDR contributing to strategical advancement, policymaking, network building and future project/programme development based on the achievements of the implemented activities.



PA 11 Security

Main achievements and unique implementation through EUSDR framework

During the reporting period, EUSDR PA 11 set a thematic focus on combatting drugs, improving coordination among Danube border police authorities and improving navigation, fight against hybrid threats as well as the development of horizontal cooperation with other thematic areas. The steady horizontal cooperation between EUSDR PA 11 and PA 1a are a good practice example for **creating long-term platforms for cooperation** between various actors among the (EU and non-EU) Danube countries, such as port administrations, border control authorities, customs and associations of ship-owners. One of the most visible and tangible result achieved in the reporting period is the introduction of the **DAVID forms**¹⁷⁵, which aim is to facilitate inland navigation and remove administrative burdens on ship owners and related businesses while at the same time keeping high standards of border controls. The implementation of the DAVID navigation forms will undoubtedly increase the efficiency of border control procedures in a way that they will become harmonised, simplified and digitised in a long-term and sustainable manner. Another focus was put on the already long-established networking and cooperation in the Danube Region within **Aquapol**¹⁷⁶, where Ukraine was given the prospect of a candidate status. Other EUSDR countries like Austria and Slovakia also showed interest in applying for the organisation. EUSDR PA 11 placed great emphasis on **encouraging and ensuring the active participation of Steering Group members** in the implementation of the PA. Steering Group members were invited to submit project proposals for large projects that could be designated as EUSDR projects or ideas for small thematic events that could be partly funded under the PAC support projects.

EUSDR PA 11 reports progresses in PA implementation on the **basis of implemented activities** to external conductors of studies and to the Danube Transnational Programme. The reports address respective target groups, meet the set objectives and move towards achieving the project outputs. EUSDR PA 11 does not use quantifiable indicators and targets.

In the context of global pandemics, the activities of PA 11 have shown that there is great added value in **establishing sustainable networks** and continuing them in a unique way. PA 11 was able to find new

¹⁷⁴ <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/participation-day/>.

¹⁷⁵ <https://navigation.danube-region.eu/working-groups/wg-6-administrative-processes/>.

¹⁷⁶ <https://www.aquapol-police.org/>.

opportunities for cooperation in the Danube Region by changing working methods and making targeted requests to stakeholders.

Policy development

In 2021, the PA 11 coordination took part in the consultations for the strategic document called **The Salzburg Forum Vision 2030**¹⁷⁷ developed under the Czech Presidency of the Salzburg Forum. In the context of this process a reference was made to other cross-cutting initiatives and the need to search for future synergies and cooperation possibilities offered by the EUSDR and other regional cooperation platforms and organisations such as the Brdo Process, PCC SEE, ICMPD or SELEC.

Projects and processes – implementation & funding

During the reported period one project was labelled as a PA 11 project, namely the **CO3DIL**¹⁷⁸ project in the field of fight against drugs funded by the Internal Security Fund. The project was led by the National Drug Headquarters at the Czech police, receiving great support from Europol and Interpol. The project gave opportunity to act on real cases and to support existing foreign working groups. In addition, new trends on the synthetic drug market were identified. The strategic objectives of the project were dismantling storage and production facilities for illicit drugs, including methamphetamine. As a practical result, a manual was produced on how to deal with dismantling laboratories for methamphetamine. It was translated into seven languages and provided to project partners.

¹⁷⁷ http://www.salzburgforum.org/files/20210624_Salzburg%20Forum%20Agenda%202030_final.pdf.

¹⁷⁸ <https://www.policie.cz/clanek/projekt-co3dil.aspx>.

4. Implementation & Activities across Priority Areas

Having taken stock of developments and achievements per Priority Area, the following sections give a compact overview of key aspects across Priority Areas with regards to horizontal frames, capitalisation, Steering Groups, cooperation with stakeholders and strategic policy development.

4.1. Horizontal Activities

The revised EUSDR Action Plan defines three horizontal frames, which are relevant for all five strategic objectives and to be implemented in the 12 Priority Areas: 1) digitalisation, 2) migration and demographic change, and 3) climate change and sustainable development.

Within the reporting period, digitalisation gained a great boost due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meetings were organised as virtual events and thus travelling as well as the use of printed documents during meetings was reduced to zero. Furthermore, newsletters were sent only in digital format and PAs in general minimised printed copies, deliverables and other material in order to build sustainable project coordination.

On a thematic level, Table 4 gives an overview on how the EUSDR horizontal frames were addressed in the Priority Areas.

Table 4: EUSDR horizontal frames

PA	Digitalisation	Migration and Demographic Change	Climate Change and Sustainable Development
PA 1a	Efforts are being made to digitise processes in Actions/Working Groups 1, 4, 5 and 6: WG 1: Digitalisation in waterway management to support maintenance and rehabilitation has been in focus for years. WG 4: concerns the digital provision of river information services for inland navigation, thus the entire action is aimed at digitalisation. WG 5: The national crew databases are implemented to further digitalise control processes and the exchange of data about nautical personnel. PA 1a was instrumental in supporting the Danube countries in setting up their databases. WG 6: aims at the simplification, harmonisation and digitalisation of border control processes in the Danube Region. The digital reporting of control forms is actively supported.	The topic of demographic change and migration is not specifically addressed in PA 1a. However, these changes do have an impact on the labour market which is addressed in Action 5: Contribute to the enhanced quality of education and jobs. Currently, the implementation of the Directive EU 2017/2397 has priority.	The overall target of PA 1a is to increase the share of inland waterway transport in the total transport of freight across the Danube Region. The growth of Danube transport should also be accompanied by investments in an environmentally friendly Danube fleet, so that the total sustainability of freight and passenger transport along the Danube corridor would be improved. This issue is addressed in the WG 3. Furthermore, within WG 1 ways of operating the waterway infrastructure in a climate-resilient manner are addressed among the Danube waterway administrations.
PA 1b	Digitalisation of transport is an issue of everyday work. Progress within the EU and the Danube macro-region is an item of every meeting and event organised by PA 1b.	n/a	All activities related to transport infrastructure construction and transport services are making efforts to reduce pollution, in particular emissions and noise. New construction materials that are not harmful to people and the environment, that are recyclable and where possible can be part of circular economy are prioritised.
PA 2	A significant step towards digitalisation was the establishment of a PA 2 interactive portal DESTINE ¹⁷⁹ , which serves as a central information pool of the most relevant energy topics PA 2 is addressing (along different energy sources, sectors, topic highlights, cross-cutting issues). It is complemented by an interactive web-map portal, where data of the different thematic topics are visualised on different maps.	n/a	The ultimate goals of climate and energy policies (the decrease of CO2 emissions) are strongly interconnected. Most of the actions of PA 2 are addressing sustainable energy goals, such as affordable, reliable, and modern energy for all by 2030 with renewable energy sources and energy efficiency in the focus.
PA 3	The project implemented by PA 3 includes two conferences that address the topic of	n/a	n/a

¹⁷⁹ to be completed by the end of 2022, temporary working access: <https://dws.treconecon.hu/>

PA Digitalisation	Migration and Demographic Change	Climate Change and Sustainable Development
digitalisation and innovation: Conference on Heritage Innovation technology and Conference on digital transformation in Tourism.		
PA n/a 4	n/a	PA 4 concentrated on the topics of climate change, which is the focus of the EU Green Deal and one of the topics selected by PA 4 for the embedding process. In this sense PA 4 SK fully supported the Slovak EUSDR PCY, e.g. with the organisation of the conference “Climate Change Adaptation: Challenges and Opportunities in Water Management” in 09/2021. Climate change aspects resonated also in the study on water retention in urban areas elaborated by the Department of Landscape Engineering of the Slovak Agricultural University in Nitra in 2020. A continuation of this study was the water retention leaflet, where PA 4 summarised best practice examples of water retention in urban areas from 8 countries in the Danube Region.
PA n/a 5	PA 5 Disaster Management Working Group (DMWG) members are providing ongoing assistance to those in need. The ongoing cooperation between member states is an excellent example of the fruitful relationship of the DMWG.	PA 5 actions and targets are highly related to Action 5: Anticipate regional and local impacts of climate change. Several projects have received Letters of Recommendation: The LIFE-MICACC LoM about Municipalities as integrators and coordinators in the adaptation to climate change, the PREP-R (Preparedness for climate change-related risks in the Western Balkan region) and RISKHUB (reducing Risks by Improving Interoperability between Slovakia and Hungary for Better Preparedness) projects, which also aims at reducing the effects of climate change, and protecting the environment.
PA n/a 6	n/a	All activities of PA 6 are aiming to ensure healthy and viable ecosystems and contribute to climate change mitigation. PA 6 provides a platform to follow up and enforce new global and EU processes related to environment and nature conservation – such as EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, CBDs Post-2020 GBF, UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, etc. Additionally, it could help implement new trends (through old processes) that need to be (more strongly) enforced through the EUSDR, i.e. require collaboration on (trans)regional level – sustainable use of natural resources; ecosystem services assessment, restoration and conservation; development of blue-green infrastructure and restoring and/or preserving the ecological corridors (habitat connectivity); climate change mitigation and adaptation through Nature-based solutions. These objectives are broken down to realistic activities taking place on the ground, mostly by the stakeholders, which are organised in the Task Forces.
PA 7 PA 7 was a leader of the macro-regional Task Force on Home-schooling. ¹⁸⁰	One of the PA 7 priorities is to promote inclusiveness of the European Research Area (ERA) and close the innovation gap through capacity building, promoting research excellence, and supporting collaboration in EU R&I programmes. Danube Region states see the positive impact of the Widening schemes introduced under Horizon 2020 counterbalancing the traditional mobility patterns from East to West	Increasing the participation of Danube countries in the Horizon Europe programme is one of the main aims of PA 7 activities. To this aim, a stakeholder workshop was organised in 06/2021, where opportunities of the programme to support projects addressing climate challenges were presented. PA 7 is devoted to initiating participation of Danube countries in ERA policy action Nr. 11 An ERA for green transformation.

¹⁸⁰ <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/dtp-capitalisation-strategy/mrs-good-practices/>

PA Digitalisation	Migration and Demographic Change	Climate Change and Sustainable Development
	and welcoming similar measures stipulated in Horizon Europe. PA 7 has supported the mobility of the Danube researchers through the Danube multilateral call and through launching an online matchmaking platform supporting the creation of consortia for Horizon Europe widening project proposals ¹⁸¹ .	
PA 8 Digitalisation has a huge impact on the work of PA 8. As a result, one Working Group is dedicated to the issues of digitalisation and is called Digital Danube. In addition, one Action of the revised EUSDR Action Plan is also dedicated to digitalisation: "Establishment of an Innovative Digital Ecosystem in the Danube Region in order to support SMEs when tackling the challenges of a digitalised world".	n/a	Sustainability is seen as a cross-sectoral issue and therefore is taken into account in the activities of all Working Groups. Especially the topics EU Green Deal and bioeconomy become more and more important.
PA 9 Digitalisation was addressed in PA 9 activities in relation to the digitalisation of the labour market, as well as digital skills, digital education and media literacy. In addition, PA 9 contributed to EUSDR meetings, raising awareness of the importance of digital skills for the green and digital transition, for example during the EUSDR Annual Forum in 2020.	In the framework of the revision of the Action Plan, these topics were removed from the sole responsibility of PA 9 and introduced as a horizontal frame. However, the war in Ukraine and its impact on the labour market and education systems in the Danube Region will be duly considered.	These topics are considered as far as labour market and education policy are concerned. Specific attention is given to the area of green skills, for instance in the framework of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence.
PA 10 PA 10 supports digitalisation in various aspects and activities with thematic focus on e-governance, the exploration of digitalisation for public services, effective online communication and other aspects of cooperation among stakeholders.	Modus operandi and project activities are mostly societal topics, in which processes of migration and demographic change are strongly interwoven. The topic of migration is strongly included in core PA activities (such as cooperation in networks for Fighting Trafficking in Human Beings), within discussions (organised within the Danube Participation Day and the Young Bled Strategic Forum), project proposals and network support (as cooperation within cross border networks and opportunities) and in direct reaction to major societal challenges and humanitarian crises. Demographic change also represents a topic of discussion within the PA's networks, project activities and events and is thoroughly considered within consultations with young generations (through closer opportunities for decision-making cooperation and generational non-discrimination) and through consultation/cooperation with stakeholders of the civil society, creating a significant and important bottom-up approach towards policy creation.	Most of the activities within PA 10 do not directly address only climate change and sustainable development, whereas the mentioned topics are intensively interwoven within the discussions and sub-parts of the activities. Within the activities and proceedings of the Danube Participation Day and the Young Bled Strategic Forum, experts in the field of climate change and sustainable development (represented by young ambassadors and civil society organisations) are present. The PA additionally cooperates in all networks and projects where its work experience may be of beneficial support and partnership, most recently identified within a potential partnership with PA 6 "Biodiversity" to work together in the Task Force Danube Landscapes.
PA 11 n/a	n/a	n/a

4.2.Capitalisation

EUSDR Priority Areas **capitalise on previous results** in various ways in order to further develop the PA and its policies (see Figure 5). In the reporting period, almost all PAs built new activities on results of previous activities. Furthermore, in many PAs previous methods, good practices and/or stakeholders were shared/built on. Often, capitalisation is understood also as a process of complementarity, i.e.

¹⁸¹ <https://widening-cooperation-danuberegion.b2match.io/marketplace>

building synergies by mutual complementing or completing. To a lesser extent, PAs revised current activities by including results of previous activities. In a few PAs, capitalisation took place via the Interreg Capitalisation Strategy and results were elaborated and provided in the Thematic Poles of the Danube Transnational Programme (DTP). The DTP Capitalisation Strategy aims to strengthen the links between projects working on similar topics (Thematic Poles), to enable projects to exploit and consolidate one another's achievements and create a higher leverage effect. This enhances the visibility and impact of both projects and the programme.

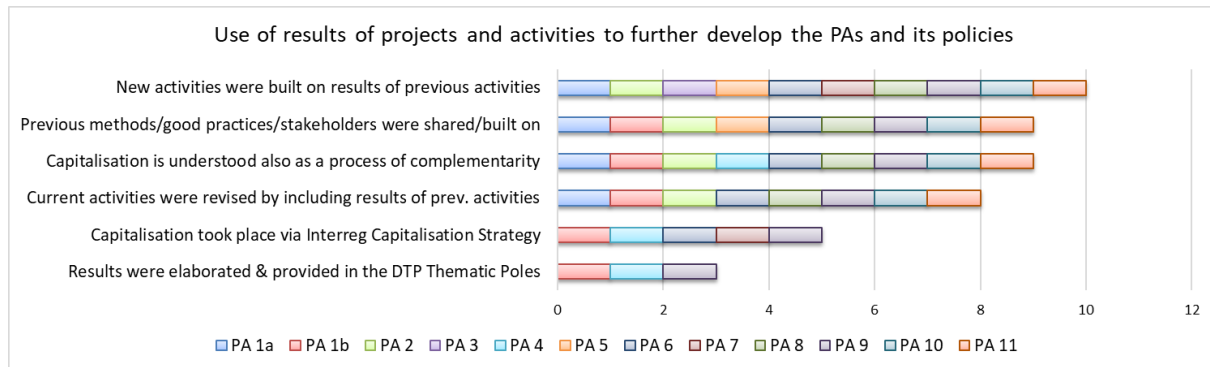


Figure 5: Use of results of projects and activities to further develop the PAs and its policies (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

In the following paragraphs, further explanation and some examples on how the results of projects and activities were used to further develop the Priority Areas and their policies are presented.

- In PA 1a, for the elaboration of the Danube Ministerial Conclusions the results of several national and transnational projects concerned with fairway rehabilitation and maintenance were taken into consideration and referenced in the conclusions. For the elaboration of Policy Recommendations on Fleet modernisation (Action 3) the results of the GRENDL project, the Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) for the Partnership on Zero-Emission Waterborne Transport (WATERBORNE, June 2021) and studies initiated by the CCNR were taken into consideration.
- PA 2 is associated project partner in the DanuP2Gas project which will advance transnational energy planning by promoting generation and storage strategies for renewables in the Danube Region by coupling the electric power and gas sector. PA 2 was actively involved in the preparation of the HyEFRE project, which builds on the results of the DanuP-2-Gas project. Its objective is to examine how to increase the efficiency of green hydrogen production by utilising waste heat. It was submitted to the last call of the Interreg Central Europe programme. PA 2 will again serve as ASP in the project. Furthermore, PA 2 conducted an extensive survey among the SG members to define the most important energy topics. Based on the results of the survey and a workshop organised to discuss the results, the current activities will be revised and new challenges will be addressed. Moreover, several studies conducted in the field of energy – such as the green transport study, energy storage study, assessment of the National Energy and Climate Plans, etc. – showed that the most important topic of the upcoming years will be hydrogen (generation, transport, storage, utilisation, etc.). Consequently, PA 2 is following closely the developments in the hydrogen field, participates in workshops and conferences, follows projects and joined the Hungarian Hydrogen Platform. Hydrogen will also be the most important topic during the next PAC project.
- In PA 3 the results of the Transdanube.Pearls – Network for Sustainable Mobility along the Danube project were used to draft the terms of reference for a study within the National Recovery and Resilience Plan to identify the routes of EuroVelo 6 and EuroVelo 13 in Romania.

- PA 4 highlighted that capitalisation is foreseen as a continual process that enables utilisation of results produced by implemented projects. Benefits of capitalisation include knowledge management, placement of results into context and transformation of achievements into durable values. Successful DTP projects are divided into Thematic Poles, each devoted to a different field (e.g. water). Within the Thematic Pole Water Management, there are the following projects: MEASURES, Deepwater-CE, PlasticFreeDanube and Tidy UP. Since there is no budget for joint events, the project representatives were invited to PA 4 events (SG meetings, stakeholders' conferences, etc.). There is a capitalisation effort of common usage of results and outcomes among projects.
- In PA 5 good practices were kept, while new processes were initiated as well. The results of the projects were built into the new initiatives launched by the Priority Area. The Disaster Management Working Group provided a new platform to further develop partnerships and initiate new project ideas.
- For PA 6, a study on exploiting funding opportunities¹⁸² provided information on available funding sources for the current programming period and a list of projects contributing to the implementation of PA 6. The analysis conducted in 2018 introduced financing possibilities and gave a cross-section look into previous projects financed by the EU and other funding sources. It covered all programmes that give financing for this specific PA and other relevant documents. The analysis provided background information for incorporating the MRS objectives into the programming of the financing documents in the 2021-2027 MFF. PA 6 further highlighted that the current results and processes show that cooperation with relevant stakeholders in other EUSDR PAs as well as other MRS is necessary. In this way, the contribution of the process within the EUSDR can significantly go beyond the Danube Region, which has already been exemplified by the cooperation between EUSDR PA 6 and the Carpathian Convention and lead to effective capitalisation of knowledge and use of all data and results.
- PA 7 has made the biggest progress in the reporting period when analysing the Participation of the Danube Region Countries in Horizon 2020. Based on the recommendations from this study¹⁸³, with the support of the Austrian Ministry of Education, Science and Research (and WG on DFCN and WG on ERA), PA 7 organised an Online Info Day as a back-to-back event to the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum 2021 and a Long-Term Virtual Matchmaking (B2B-Meetings) Event primarily for Danube Region researchers¹⁸⁴. This initiative aimed to bridge potential applicants from the Danube Region in upcoming Horizon Europe "Widening" calls in order to foster participation in this programme.
- PA 7 further specifically highlighted the DTP Capitalisation Strategy in the previous period as beneficial, as it helped to build links with concrete projects with a strategic importance for PA 7, work on the common progress and fulfilment of the concrete projects objectives (programme level) as well as support in achieving the targets from the EUSDR Action Plan (strategy level).
- Compared to previous periods, PA 8 recognised more capitalisation of project results within the Danube Transnational Programme but also with other Interreg programmes in the reporting period.
- PA 10 reported that based on the results of activities, stakeholders and experts in the explored fields that were identified as dependable and knowledgeable project partners and the identified needs, future activities are prepared through synergies that enable cross-sector and cross-

¹⁸² https://nature.danube-region.eu/mdocs-posts/funding_opportunities_1/

¹⁸³ https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/eusdr-pa7-recommendations-for-increasing-participation-in-eu-framework-programme-for-horizon-europe/?preview_id=2871&preview_nonce=d2e6af7675&post_format=standard&thumbnail_id=2872&preview=true

¹⁸⁴ <https://widening-cooperation-danuberegion.b2match.io/>

border cooperation, involvement of different stakeholders within the EUSDR architecture as well as other macro-regional strategies. Such a process leads to stronger and more comprehensive solution building for joint challenges, financial security through sound and sustainable financial construction and a joint search for new opportunities for capitalisation and progress.

- PA 11 organised two events in 2021 – one on hybrid threats and one on combatting drugs. They are part of a series of events where each one is building upon the previous one. For example the seminar on combatting drugs is to be followed by two other seminars organised jointly with SELEC - a seminar on combatting financial crime and a seminar on illegal migration. There is no direct follow-up from the CO3DIL project but expert networks have been established and cooperation among different actors was strengthened.

When developing **activities/processes/projects**, Priority Areas often paid attention to **interlinking** them i.e. within or among PAs or Pillars (see Figure 6). The majority of PAs reported that networks and personal contacts were used for linking new activities/projects/processes. To link new activities with other PAs is less common.

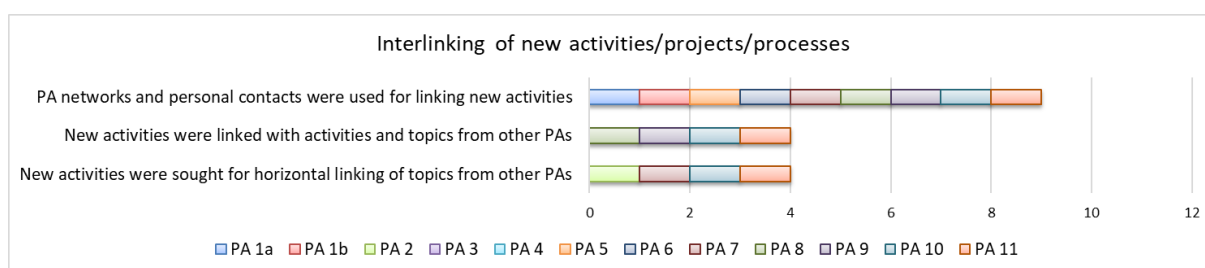


Figure 6: Interlinking of new activities/projects/processes (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

In the following paragraphs, further explanation and some examples on how activities, projects and/or processes have been interlinked are presented.

- The inland navigation community in the Danube Region is rather small and most stakeholders know each other. Occasionally PA 1a invites project representatives to present the results of their projects to the PA 1a Steering Group or a specific Working Group for information purposes.
- Sustainable development is an important horizontal topic, thus PA 2 cooperated with PA 4, PA 5, and PA 6 on several occasions. The respective PACs and HU NC organised a project financing seminar to present funding opportunities in the field of sustainable energy, water and environmental issues to interested stakeholders. The PAs also participated in the Budapest Sustainability Summit and Expo with a common booth. In the future, more attention should be paid to cooperation with other PAs.
- The Disaster Management Working Group of PA 5 and its concept was used to link projects and processes in relation to disaster-related topics, while the Steering Group of the PA was constantly informed as well regarding the different topics.
- PA 6 highlighted the example of the establishment of a new Task Force on Landscapes in 2021, with a special focus laid on practical initiation and implementation of continuous projects that integrate aspects like human livelihood quality, biological diversity and environmental fundamentals of life.
- PA 7 (as a horizontal PA) organised events across other macro-regions (with support from Interact), cooperated with other PAs and paid attention to finding to links and cooperation possibilities with funding bodies, programmes and initiatives on EU level (such as Horizon Europe, Eureka/EUROSTARS, COST, ESA, R&D&I liaison offices situated in Brussels).

- Another example of joining the activities was the joint organisation of the PA 7 and PA 8 Steering Group meeting. The aim of this joint meeting was to identify possible synergies and fields of collaboration primarily in the area of embedding the macro-regional priorities into mainstream programmes. Many promising ideas were initiated and many activities proposed.
- PA 9 and PA 10 have a strong collaboration due to the similarity in their targets and focus groups (youth, civil society) that enable a natural partnership in project activities. The activities of PA 10 further overlap with other PAs (also those addressing more technical than social topics within their field of work), currently cooperating with PA 11 to develop a platform to fight trafficking in human beings and with PA 6 to work together in the Task Force Danube Landscapes.
- PA 11 highlighted the example of Collaboration for Dismantling Drugs Distribution and Illicit Laboratories (CO3DIL), implemented from 02/2019 to 11/2021. There was no direct follow-up but expert networks have been established and cooperation among different actors was strengthened.

Most of the Priority Areas also paid special attention to **leveraging the implemented activities on different levels** (see Figure 7). Eight PAs linked their activities with transnational activities, five PAs each reported that their activities were linked to the national and regional level.

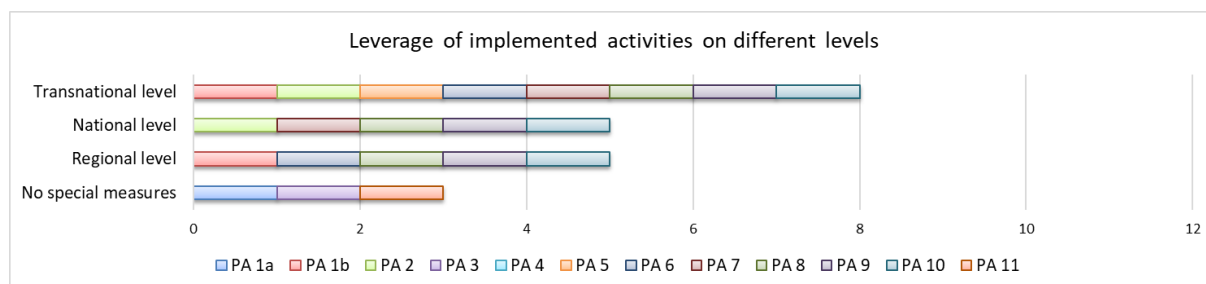


Figure 7: Leverage of implemented activities on different levels (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

In the following paragraphs, further explanation and some examples on how the Priority Areas' activities were linked with regional/national/transnational activities are presented.

- By following the work of other regional, national and international organisations/institutions, PA 1b is well informed of what issues have been already dealt with and what issues need to be addressed in the future for the benefits of improved transport infrastructure and services.
- The activities of the PA 2 had impact on national, regional and EU level, but mostly on regional level. Among others, they contributed to the security of energy supply in the Danube Region and the enhancement of use of renewable energy sources. In terms of security of gas supply, PA 2 has been working on mapping the possibilities of regional underground energy storage. In terms of renewable energy sources, PA 2 has been working on the analysis of National Energy and Climate Plans, where cooperation took place with experts from national Ministries and EU representatives.
- The PA 5 Steering Group and the Disaster Management Working Group served as platforms for sharing implemented activities on transnational level.
- The PA 6 DTP project supports cooperation of SG and TF and all the activities are implemented on regional or transnational level.
- PA 7 focused on cooperation with relevant national bodies across the Region when communicating activities, new initiatives or cooperation possibilities. When analysing various aspects of the knowledge society, trying to mitigate gaps (e.g. in communicating science) or finding ways for improvement (e.g. participation in EU research programmes or improving

digital education/eLearning/home-schooling), PA 7 tried to cooperate with colleagues across the regions.

- At the majority of PA 8 organised events, the agenda included a presentation of relevant projects with the aim to share knowledge and examples, but also to capitalise the results of those project. At those events, lots of national/regional and transnational policy makers were present.
- The activities of PA 9 were linked with activities of the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE), the Central European Cooperation in Education and Training (CECE), the European Training Foundation (ETF), EUSDR Annual Fora, and national coordination platforms (for instance in Austria).
- The activities implemented within PA 10 range from regional or local level (with empowerment and networking of stakeholders within the Danube Local Actors Platform) to development within a regional component (Young Bled Strategic Forum, Danube Participation Day, Capacity building activities), to the national level (National Participation Days, capacity building requested on national levels).

In order to support the capitalisation of the implemented activities, **Priority Areas disseminated their results** via various channels (see Figure 8). In all PAs, the Steering Group members spread the results in their networks. Many PAs promoted their results within specific events and posted them on their websites. Half of the PAs disseminated results among other MRS, sent them to national line ministries or via newsletter. Only five PAs each shared their results with other PAs or line DGs.

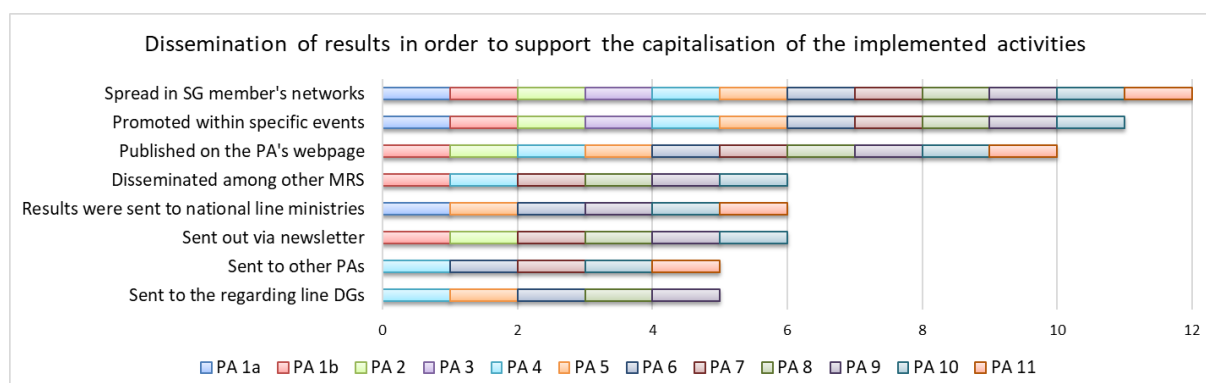


Figure 8: Dissemination of results to support the capitalisation of activities (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

Further examples of communicating the results of the Priority Areas can also be found in Chapter 2.5 on Communication.

4.3. Steering Groups and governance structure

Steering Group meetings are vital platforms for Priority Area Coordinators and Steering Group members from all 14 participating countries to discuss current developments in their field of expertise, to take decisions on the future course of action and to coordinate their actions across the Danube Region. In 2020 and 2021, a total of 46 Steering Group meetings were held across the 12 Priority Areas. In most cases, the agendas of these meetings are attached under 'More information' (see Table 5).

Table 5: List of Steering Group meetings in 2020 and 2021

PA	SG meeting	Date & Place	More information
PA 1a	18 th SG Meeting	19/05/2020 online	https://navigation.danube-region.eu/steering-group
	19 th SG Meeting	17/09/2021 online	
	20 st SG Meeting	09/12/2021 online	

PA 1b	20 st SG Meeting	02/06/2020 online	https://transport.danube-region.eu/steering-group
	21 st SG Meeting	14/10/2020 online	
	22 nd SG Meeting	17/12/2020 online	
	23 rd SG Meeting	25/03/2021 online	
	24 th SG Meeting	04/10/2021 online	
PA 2	20 st SG Meeting	27/05/2020 online	https://energy.danube-region.eu/steering-group
	21 st SG Meeting	03/12/2020 online	
	22 nd SG Meeting	29/06/2021 online	
	23 rd SG Meeting	15/12/2021 online	
PA 3	20 st SG Meeting	03/06/2020 online	https://cultureandtourism.danube-region.eu
	21 st SG Meeting	01/10/2020 online	
	22 nd SG Meeting	11/10/2021 online	
	23 rd SG Meeting	14/12/2021 online	
PA 4	19 th SG Meeting	26/05/2020 online	https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/meetings
	20 st SG Meeting	10/11/2020 online	
	21 st SG Meeting	09/06/2021 online	
	22 nd SG Meeting	19/10/2021 online	
PA 5	17 th SG Meeting	28/05/2020 online	https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/files
	18 th SG Meeting	19/11/2020 online	
	19 th SG Meeting	17/06/2021 online	
	20 st SG Meeting	25/11/2021 online	
PA 6	13 th SG Meeting	09-10/12/2020 online	https://nature.danube-region.eu/12th-steering-group-meeting
	14 th SG Meeting	13/07/2021 online	
	15 th SG Meeting	14/09/2021 online	
	16 th SG Meeting	11/11/2021 online	
PA 7	19 th SG Meeting	03/06/2020 online	https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/documents
	20 st SG Meeting	09/11/2021 online	
	21 st SG Meeting	02/06/2021 online	
	22 nd SG Meeting	13/12/2021 online	
PA 8	17 th SG Meeting	03/06/2020 online	https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/news/page/3
	18 th SG Meeting	10/12/2020 online	
	19 th SG Meeting	20/10/2021 online	
PA 9	18 th SG Meeting	19/06/2020 online	https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/past-events
	19 th SG Meeting	26/11/2020 online	
	20 st SG Meeting	27/05/2021 online	
	21 st SG Meeting	04-05/11/2021 online	
PA 10	18 th SG Meeting	16/04/2020 online	https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/priority-area-10/priority-area-10-steering-group
	19 th SG Meeting	03/12/2020 online	
	20 st SG Meeting	22/04/2021 online	
	21 st SG Meeting	14/12/2021 online	
PA 11	18 th SG Meeting	26/11/2020 online	https://security.danube-region.eu/steering-group
	19 th SG Meeting	03/06/2021 online	
	20 st SG Meeting	25/11/2021 online	

In all EUSDR Priority Areas, the Steering Group members **report on the developments** and upcoming topics in their institutions/countries during SG meetings. E-mails are also often used to share information, news and events as well as to initiate written procedures. Following the SG meetings, usually a report/meeting minutes are distributed among the SG members, enabling everyone to access the information in a comprehensive and transparent way, even if they were not able to attend the meeting personally.

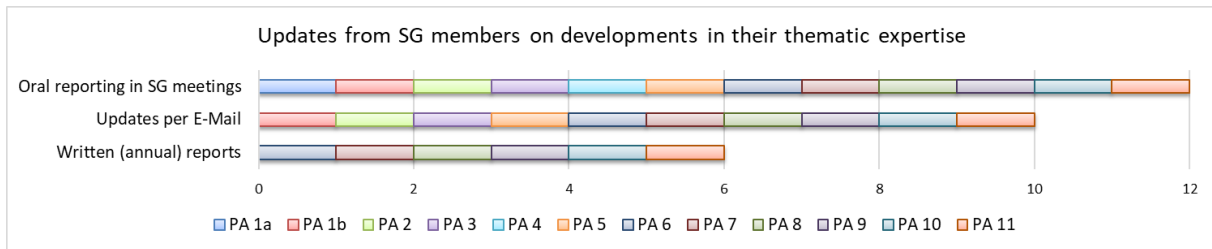


Figure 9: Updates from SG members (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

Participation in SG meetings varies between Priority Areas and countries. In the reporting period, some PAs found an increased participation due to online meetings¹⁸⁵. Other PAs, however, reported that even online SG meetings during the pandemic did not contribute to a higher participation¹⁸⁶. Ongoing challenges are inactive members, who are rather passive or do not participate in the meetings, or countries that did not nominate SG members at all. Administrative capacity, empowerment of the SG members and financial means to carry out the tasks needed are lacking in some countries. Furthermore, SG members change frequently, sometimes leaving no institutional knowledge which has a negative impact on the continuity of workflows.

Closer cooperation is needed to secure the active implementation of EUSDR in the future.

Organised capacity building activities, inclusion within events and thematic discussions, sharing of opportunities and resources is essential in order to guarantee successful progress within the PA.



The EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper published in 2020 (see chapter 2.1) and the 'Needs assessment on engaging SG members' published in 2021 (see chapter 2.6) have outlined a strategic approach towards the support in the EUSDR governance, with the role of Steering Groups being a vital and integral part of the PAs. The documentation has been presented to the SG members during meetings, discussed and further distributed in order to support engagement and information sharing. Additionally, several Priority Areas¹⁸⁷ reported that they put special emphasis on facilitating a better involvement of SG members, for example through dedicated workshops or informal online meetings to discuss the roles and expectations of SG members, surveys dedicated to SG members, additional capacity building or networking activities. On the other hand, one PA emphasised that participation in the Steering Group is voluntary and it is much more important to continue the work with the committed Steering Group members and observers who are willing to contribute to the process.

In several Priority Areas, **Working Groups/Task Forces/Advisory Bodies** have been established in order to support the work of the Steering Groups (see Table 6).

Table 6: Working Groups/Task Forces/Advisory Bodies in 2020 and 2021

PA	Working Groups/Task Forces/Advisory Bodies
PA 1a	PA 1a has established one Working Group for each Action: ACTION 1: Contribute to improve waterway and port infrastructure & management ACTION 2: Foster business development ACTION 3: Facilitate fleet modernisation ACTION 4: Support the further roll-out and enhancement of River Information Services

¹⁸⁵ For example: PA 1b, PA 4, PA 5, PA 10

¹⁸⁶ For example: PA 2, PA 6, PA 7, PA 8

¹⁸⁷ For example: PA 2, PA 4, PA 10

	ACTION 5: Contribute to the enhanced quality of education and jobs ACTION 6: Contribute to the simplification, harmonisation and digitalisation of administrative processes
PA 1b	n/a
PA 2	PA 2 examined the possibility to set up working groups to support its activities, but it was postponed.
PA 3	n/a
PA 4	n/a – Note that the EUSDR PA 4 PAC teams are regularly cooperating with the ICPDR relevant expert groups and report back to its main expert groups (such as the RBM EG) and high level group (in the frame of the Ordinary Meetings and Standing Working Group meetings).
PA 5	Disaster Management Working Group (DM-WG)
PA 6	1. Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF) 2. Danube Region Invasive Alien Species Network (DIAS) 3. Danubeparks - Network of protected areas 4. Soil Strategy Network in the Danube Region (SONDAR) 5. Task Force on pesticides and chemicals (TFPC) 6. Working Group Masterplan Bavarian Danube (WGMPBD) 7. Task force on Danube Landscapes (TFDL) (new)
PA 7	Within the reporting period, PA 7 focused on the revitalisation of the working groups: Working group on Danube Funding Coordination Network (DFCN) Working Group on Higher Education and Mobilities Working Group on RIS3 Working Group on better participation in ERA
PA 8	Innovation and Technology Transfer Digital Danube Cluster and regional Development Female Entrepreneurship Artificial Intelligence
PA 9	Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence
PA 10	Danube Local Actors Platform
PA 11	No Working Groups established within PA 11, but participation in the Joint Working Group on Administrative Process with experts from PA 1a and PA 11.

The **outcomes of the Steering Group meetings are also provided to the NCs and to further national levels** through various ways (see Figure 10). Most of the PACs have established a regular exchange with the NCs apart from SG meetings. Further, SG members often spread information about the PA to their networks. In six Priority Areas, the SG meeting minutes are submitted to their respective NCs after each meeting. Less common is a regular exchange of PACs with line ministries apart from SG meetings, an active promotion of the impact of the Strategy by SG members or the dissemination of results to officials of line ministries after each SG meeting.

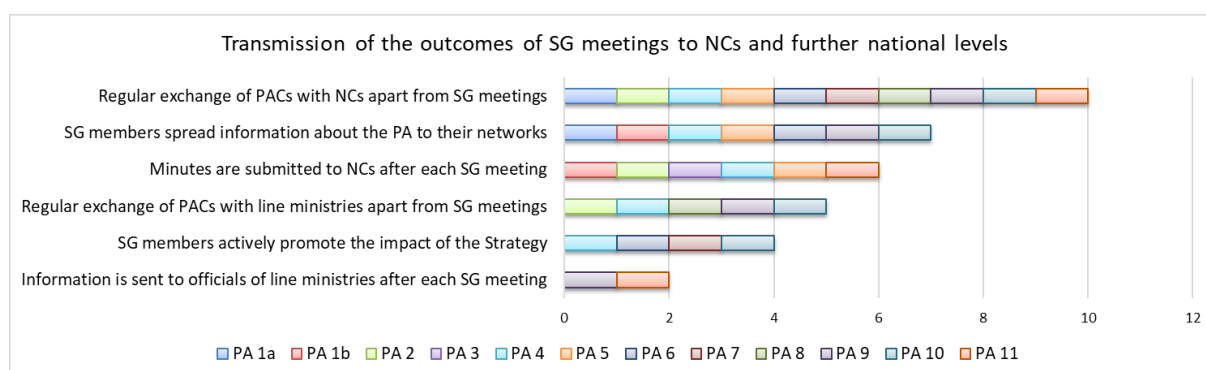


Figure 10: Provision of outcomes of SG meetings (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

In the following paragraphs, some **highlights and good practice examples** resulting from the cooperation and teamwork with the Steering Groups in 2020 and 2021 are presented.

- PA 1b published a brochure '[Danube Region Infrastructure - Rail links](#)' for which SG members were crucial in responding to a questionnaire.

- In PA 2, discussions with SG members became a lot more frequent during the period. A project generation workshop resulted in the support of a winning project, suggested by an SG member. The workshop 'Let's talk all together!' helped to improve the involvement of SG members into the activities of PA 2. Further, all SG members were involved in the assessment of National energy and climate plans (NECPs) in the region. This cooperation was reviewed very positively by the SG members. In 2021 PA 2 circulated among the SG members a survey to evaluate their involvement and the work of PA 2. Another survey was conducted amongst SG member in order to identify the priority topics of PA 2 for the next PAC project.
- In PA 4, the SK and HU PAC teams maintained good cooperation from the beginning on. Between relevant stakeholders (ICPDR and ISRBC) trilateral meetings are organised twice a year to ensure that joint activities and results are properly embedded in the Actions and objectives of PA 4. Thanks to the fruitful cooperation with the SG members six Letters of Recommendation (LoR) have been issued in 2020 and 2021. When relevant brochures on PA specific topics have been developed, the SG members were also strongly involved and their feedback was taken into account.
- In PA 5, due to COVID-19 and the initiation of online/hybrid meetings, more SG members were present at the SG meeting compared to the in-person meetings. In the future, hybrid meetings are preferred to enable participants to join remotely.
- In PA 6, the operation of governance within the Steering Group is working well. Activities on the ground are communicated by the Task Forces to the Steering Group members, who then look for further support within their respective ministries.
- In PA 7, some SG members belong to (pro)active parts (taking a leadership role) of the PA's Working Groups and strongly support the work of the PAC teams. They regularly come up with new ideas, help with coordination activities and the organisation of events (such as multilateral calls supporting Danube Region researchers, workshops and matchmaking initiatives, SG meetings).
- PA 9 has established an institutionalised exchange about current developments in the area of education and the labour market, incl. good practice examples to address challenges faced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- PA 10 highlighted that the network formed by the SG presents a unique incubator of ideas and creativity. One of the latest examples was that SG members introduced a new initiative, namely the Central European Initiative (CEI) Local dimension of activities (that represents the new 4th pillar of CEI dimensions, together with the governmental, parliamentary and economic one). Support for local communities, civil society and the bottom-up approach of stakeholder support/involvement maintains strong support within the activities of the Strategy and PA 10 and presents a unique opportunity for future cooperation among the networks, possibility for strategic partnership, cooperation on a specific topic, search for financial synergies and mutual support etc.
- In PA 11, all SG members were contacted on all topics that require decision-making or are just of informative nature. The circulated e-mails concern for example a position on possible cooperation with PA 1b, the EUSDR Annual Forum, the Guidelines on Strategic Projects and Processes, the Anti-Drug Event organised jointly with SELEC, the new Rules of Procedures for the joint meetings of NCs and PACs, the draft agenda of SG meetings asking for inputs, the outcomes of the CO3DIL Anti-drugs project led by the Czech Police, the priorities of the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency, or an overview of the work of the expert groups between PA 1a and PA 11.

At Priority Area level, three PAs reported **changes in the governance structure** in the reporting period. The most visible changes have been made in the governance system of PA 7, where the working groups

have been revitalised. Furthermore, the Slovak PAC team changed its Lead Partner institution in 2020 which brought significant changes and made the processes (e.g. connected to project management or public procurement) smoother and more efficient. PA 11 highlighted that no new structures are to be associated with the Strategy. Therefore, the Ministry of Interior of Bulgaria has nominated an expert to act as motor of the Coordination Bureau on behalf of the three PACs. In addition, a legal adviser is dealing with issues related to the implementation of the contracts for providing support to PACs on behalf of the Danube Transnational Programme, including the conduct of public procurements. Both experts are not fully dedicated to the EUSDR and perform other tasks as well. PA 10 highlighted the stronger support and involvement of youth in the EUSDR, which is currently implemented and discussed within the Danube Youth Council Task Force towards the institutionalisation of the Danube Youth Council and Danube Network of Youth Organisations as integral parts of the EUSDR governance structure.

4.4. Cooperation with stakeholders

In the reporting period, **Priority Areas cooperated with EUSDR main stakeholders** such as the EC, NCs, other PAs, SGs, DSP or DTP regularly and mainly via online meetings, e-mail or phone. In general, the cooperation is described as smooth and efficient (see Table 7 below).

Table 7: Cooperation with EUSDR main stakeholders in 2020 and 2021

Stakeholder	Cooperation
European Commission: DG REGIO	Cooperation with DG REGIO was intensified in the reporting period and is described by the EUSDR Priority Areas as excellent, smooth and efficient. Representatives of DG REGIO were present and actively involved in Steering Group meetings, enabling a regular exchange of information. Apart from participation in SG meetings, DG REGIO participated in various other meetings, workshops or processes. Furthermore, cooperation is carried out via e-mail. Many PAs highlighted cooperation in different activities and the support provided by DG REGIO, e.g. the coordination of the Young Manifesto Group (PA 2) or support to external expertise for analysing the impact of COVID-19 on tourism and culture in MRS during 2020 (PA 3). Only PA 6 reported that the attendance of DG REGIO in SG meetings was periodical and very low.
European Commission: other line DGs	Other DGs are involved on a more thematic basis and cooperation varies between DGs and PAs. Cooperation with DG MOVE was described as strong and intensive (PA 1a & PA 1b), which is reflected in their participation in SG meetings or e.g. by coordination of Danube ministerial conclusions on fairway rehabilitation and maintenance every two years (PA 1a). PAs also see good or excellent cooperation with DG CNECT (PA 10), DG EAC (PA 7 & PA 9), DG ECHO (PA 5), DG EMPL (PA 9 & PA 10), DG JRC (PA 7) and DG RTD (PA 7). Moreover, sporadic cooperation took place with DG ENV (PA 4) and DG HOME (PA 5). As stated in previous reports, continuous support of sectoral DGs is important, however, this is still not the case everywhere. Room for improvement is seen especially for cooperation with DG ENER (PA 2), DG ENV (PA 1b, PA 6) and DG NEAR (PA 1b). PA 6 highlighted that in terms of multilevel governance, DGs should better enforce their role e.g. to anchor activities on the ground to the EU policy level.
EUSDR National Coordinators (NCs)	Cooperation with National Coordinators is efficient and secured through regular NC-PAC meetings, where relevant information is shared. Most PACs, however, highlighted national coordination meetings and good cooperation with 'their' NCs, indicating that regular coordination and discussion at national level is playing a bigger role than on Strategy level. In addition, NCs also participated in different PA's event formats. NCs were e.g. actively involved in SG meetings, workshops, project financing seminars, drafting guidance papers, policy paper preparations and capacity building activities. PACs also contact NCs when they need particular help, such as in nominating SG members or finding relevant information on the country/regional level, etc. Only PA 10 highlighted a close exchange with EUSDR Presidencies and TRIO Presidencies, e.g. for drafting the programme of planned activities (Danube Participation Day, Young Bled Strategic Forum), the preparation of thematic activities upon the announced PCY core topics, or as consultants of the PA's expertise.
Other EUSDR Priority Areas (PAs)	Almost all PAs reported cooperation with one or more other EUSDR Priority Areas (see following overview). Strong cooperation can be seen between PA 1a and PA 11 (joint working group on administrative processes in Danube navigation), PA 4, PA 5 & PA 6 (Pillar-meetings and observers in other PA's SG meetings), PA 4 & PA 7 (both co-coordinated by Slovak PAC

Stakeholder	Cooperation																																																																																																																																																																									
	<p>teams), PA 7 & PA 8 (similar interests, stakeholders and targeted activities; common events; joint SG meetings etc.), PA 7 & PA 9 (cooperation on the cross-macro-regional activity focused on home-schooling), PA 9 & PA 10 (Network of ESF Managing Authorities as well as developing a platform for Roma Inclusion) and PA 10 & PA 11 (platform to fight trafficking in human beings). Furthermore, PAs are in contact and exchange of information and experience on different topics, e.g. the involvement of the SG members, the functioning of working groups, suggesting panellists or participating at specific events etc.</p> <table><tr><th></th><th>1a</th><th>1b</th><th>2</th><th>3</th><th>4</th><th>5</th><th>6</th><th>7</th><th>8</th><th>9</th><th>10</th><th>11</th></tr><tr><th>1a</th><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>XX</td></tr><tr><th>1b</th><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td></tr><tr><th>2</th><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td></tr><tr><th>3</th><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><th>4</th><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td>XX</td><td>XX</td><td>XX</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><th>5</th><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><th>6</th><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>XX</td><td>XX</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td></tr><tr><th>7</th><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>XX</td><td>XX</td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><th>8</th><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr><tr><th>9</th><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td></tr><tr><th>10</th><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td><td>XX</td></tr><tr><th>11</th><td>XX</td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td></tr></table> <p>XX = Strong cooperation X = Cooperation/coordination activities reported by one or both PAs</p>		1a	1b	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	1a		X			X			X				XX	1b	X		X									X	2		X			X	X	X	X	X		X		3													4	X		X			XX	XX	XX					5			X		XX		XX						6			X		XX	XX					X		7	X		X		XX				XX	XX			8			X					XX					9								XX			XX		10			X				X			XX		XX	11	XX	X									XX	
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Overall Cooperation with Steering Group (SG)	Cooperation and coordination with the Steering Group in the reporting period took place mainly via online SG meetings, which were usually organised twice per year. In between the meetings, PACs regularly informed the Steering Group through e-mail, organised (informal) thematic online events/workshops to discuss topics in more detail, or met at other (project) meetings/events. As described in more detail in Chapter 4.3 on Steering Groups, the quality of cooperation with SGs differs between PAs. While several PAs reported a positive, smooth and/or stable cooperation (e.g. PA 1a, PA 1b, PA 7, PA 9, PA 11), others describe it as less positive with lack or frequent change of nominated SG members as well as low or inactive participation (e.g. PA 4, PA 8).																																																																																																																																																																									
Steering Groups of other PAs	Cooperation with Steering Groups of other PAs is limited. Regular contact can be found between PA 1a and PA 11 SGs, e.g. PAC 1a being a regular guest at the Steering Group PA 11 to present progress and plans of the joint working group. Also, PA 1b participated in a PA 11 SG meeting. Within Pillar II (PA 4, PA 5 & PA 6), PACs regularly participate at SG meetings of the other PAs. Further, PAC 4 sometimes participates at PA 1a SG meetings and PAC 6 is also occasionally invited to other SG meetings. PA 7 and PA 8 are in close contact and organised a joint SG meeting in the reporting period. PAC 7 is also often invited as guest speaker in PA 4 SG meetings. PA 10 highlighted that their activities, events and networks are open to closer cooperation of SG members of other Priority Areas where the topic of discussion, field of expertise and interests of participation and exchange of best practices overlap.																																																																																																																																																																									
Danube Strategy Point (DSP)	The DSP presents an important stakeholder within the EUSDR governance as a reliable secretariat to the implementing bodies within the Strategy. All Priority Areas are in close contact with the DSP and cooperate regularly. Cooperation is seen as excellent/efficient and mainly based on the provided services on communication, reporting, capacity building and by providing tailored information which might be of interest for the PAs. Furthermore, the DSP participated in all SG meetings and other PA related events/workshops, presented relevant activities and developments, and technically supported the organisation of online meetings where requested. Room for improvement was mentioned regarding the amount of text as well as long e-mails or reporting activities, which could become overwhelming for some PACs.																																																																																																																																																																									
Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) including MA, JS, and NCPs	The DTP offers a vital support in financing MRS projects and activities. Cooperation with the DTP JS is seen as efficient and is concentrated on contractual and financial administrative issues in relation to the PAC projects. Representatives of the DTP also attended SG meetings or other events on request in order to support the exchange of information. The DTP for instance provided updates and developments at programme level or introduced possible funding sources relevant to the respective PA. For most PAs, cooperation with the MA and NCPs is rather limited; only PA 11 highlighted communication via e-mail or phone with the BG NCP in terms of the implementation of the contract for national co-financing and the FLC.																																																																																																																																																																									
Managing Bodies of other European Funding Programmes (e.g. ESF, CEF, H2020, etc.)	Cooperation with managing bodies of other European funding programmes is rather limited, with six PAs reporting that there was no direct contact in the reporting period. On the other hand, PA 4 highlighted continuous discussion with MAs in Hungary, including joint events organised, and information about funding possibilities shared by NCs. PA 5 actively seeks																																																																																																																																																																									

Stakeholder	Cooperation																																																				
	information from funding programmes and, if relevant, invites programme representatives to events. Further, the managing bodies are being approached in case support is needed for consortia during their project development phase. PA 7 regularly cooperates with the Horizon Europe support structures and, among others, established a matchmaking platform for researchers in the Danube Region in order to enhance their performance in Horizon Europe. PA 8 reported constant cooperation and meetings with representatives of relevant funding programmes. PA 9 and PA 10 are in regular exchange within the Network of ESF Managing Authorities. Through long-term cooperation, the network is involved in the exchange of developments, joint planning and exchange of best practices and innovation in order to secure engaging financial opportunities and cooperation within the Region. The ESF MA network has been particularly engaged in the embedding process and structural support towards intensified integration of EUSDR activities within the financial period 2021 – 2027.																																																				
Other Macro-Regional Strategies (MRS) representatives	<p>Cooperation with other MRS varies between MRS and PAs (see following overview). While three PAs were in no direct contacts with other MRS representatives in the reporting period, some PAs highlighted close cooperation with other MRS and several PAs reported occasional exchange or cooperation with representatives from other MRS. Especially PA 8 highlighted that many cross-macro-regional partnerships and initiatives were formed in 2020 and 2021. In addition to the cooperation established within or before this reporting period, several PAs expressed the intention to expand cooperation with other MRS, e.g. PA 4 in the field of pharmaceuticals and their removal from waters (with EUSBSR), PA 6 in the field of biodiversity (with all MRS) or PA 11 in the field of security (with EUSBSR). In addition to the thematic cooperation, cross-MRS collaboration was further intensified on national levels as well as with the support of Interact (see chapter 2.6).</p> <table><tr><th></th><th>1a</th><th>1b</th><th>2</th><th>3</th><th>4</th><th>5</th><th>6</th><th>7</th><th>8</th><th>9</th><th>10</th><th>11</th></tr><tr><td>EUSALP</td><td></td><td>XX</td><td>X</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>XX</td><td></td></tr><tr><td>EUSAIR</td><td></td><td>XX</td><td>X</td><td>XX</td><td></td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td><td>XX</td><td></td></tr><tr><td>EUSBSR</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td></td><td>X</td><td>XX</td><td>X</td><td>X</td><td>XX</td><td></td></tr></table> <p>XX = Close cooperation X = Occasional cooperation/coordination/information exchange</p>		1a	1b	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	EUSALP		XX	X				X	X	X	X	XX		EUSAIR		XX	X	XX			X	X	X		XX		EUSBSR		X	X		X		X	XX	X	X	XX	
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Other institutions/stakeholders	<p>On occasion and depending on the activity, PAs communicate and cooperate with other institutions or stakeholders. PAs reported coordination with regional and national authorities, international organisations, universities, research institutions, sectoral agencies, SMEs, NGOs, infrastructure and service providers and civil society organisations. More specifically, the following stakeholders were mentioned by one or more PAs: Working Community of the Danube Regions (ARGE Donauländer), Association of European Border Regions (AEBR Balkans), Carpathian Convention (CC), Central European Initiative, European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), Council of Europe, Danube Civil Society Forum, Dublin City University (Educational Disadvantage Centre), European Institute of Road Assessment (EIRA – EuroRAP), European Investment Bank (EIB), European Training Foundation (ETF), Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE), Global Water Partnership (GWP), International Commission for Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), Transport Community Permanent Secretariat, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Inland Transport Committee (UNECE ITC) and WIIW (Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies). See also the next paragraphs on the involvement and cooperation with other stakeholders.</p>																																																				

As mentioned above, beside the cooperation with EUSDR main stakeholders, Priority Areas communicated, involved and cooperated with other stakeholders such as academia, civil society, administrative institutions etc., which will be further illustrated in the next paragraphs.

All PAs have cooperated with **academia (e.g. universities, private research institutions, institutes, etc.)** in the past. In the reporting period 2020 and 2021, EUSDR PA 11 could not cooperate with universities or research institutions, because the respective events were cancelled or held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All other PAs reported different forms of involvement (see Figure 11), such as **information exchange** or **cooperation in projects or activities**. For instance, PA 2 is an associated strategic partner in the DanuP-2-Gas project led by the University of Applied Sciences Landshut, and PA 9 developed the Danube Region Monitor with the research institute Vienna Institute for

International Economic Studies (WIIW). PA 7 has a close cooperation with the Danube Rectors Conference (DRC). Furthermore, PAs reported several examples of **events co-organised** or mutually participated by PAs and academia, such as the workshop on ‘sewage sludge management in the Danube Region for a greener EU’ in the framework of the EU Green Week 2021 (PA 4), the PA 5 side-event of the Floodrisk2020 conference about technologies used in the monitoring tailings management facilities, the joint event of DAREnet (PA 5), the conference on ‘Circular Economy- new Challenges for Plastic’ at the Faculty for Chemical Engineering and Technology in Zagreb (PA 8), the Danube Participation Day devoted to digitalisation and participation where multiple experts from academia were included in the programme preparation (PA 10) or the Bled Strategic Forum with guests and expert speakers from academia (PA 10). Moreover, several PAs highlighted the **involvement of academia in their SGs/Working Groups or networks**, such as the Disaster Management Working Group of PA 5, SG and Task Force meetings of PA 6 or the PA 7 Working Group on Higher Education and Mobilities.

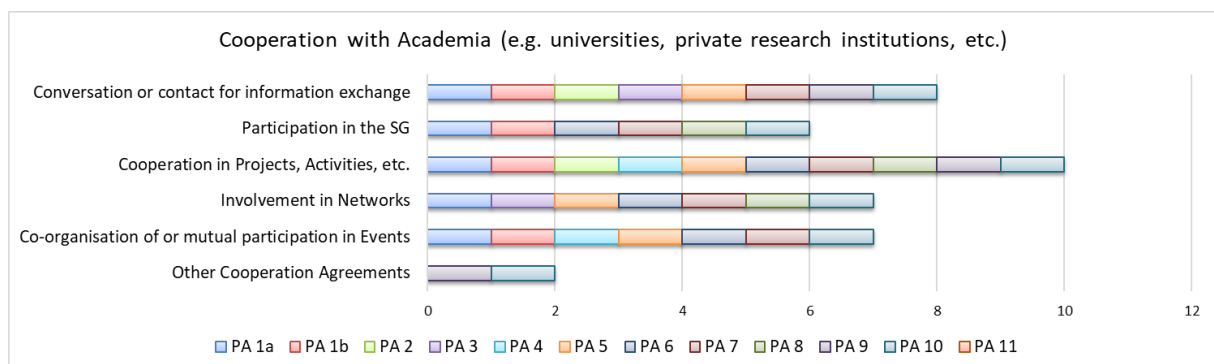


Figure 11: Cooperation with Academia (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

When it comes to **civil society (incl. NGOs, citizen groups, etc.) and youth**, almost all PAs reported cooperation activities in the reporting period (see Figure 12). For instance, different NGOs were involved in project activities and took part in Working Group and SG meetings. Especially the Disaster Management Working Group of PA 5, which is led by the Budapest Firefighter Association, reached a high number of NGOs (e.g. several national fire fighter/brigade associations, AT & HU Red Cross, BG National Association of Volunteers, HR Mountain Rescue Service, HU Civil Protection Association, HU Charity Service of the Order of Malta, RS Volunteering Support Association). With its focus on education, labour market and inclusion, young people are at the centre of the work of PA 9. PA 9 promoted the participation and empowerment of young people at different events and also actively engaged with civil society, for example through the Danube Civil Society Forum. Moreover, civil society and young generations represent one of the core groups within the activities of PA 10. The PACs reached out to NGOs, civil society organisations and other representatives on a regular basis, to identify synergies, possibilities of cooperation in the preparation of activities and events, and mutual funding opportunities. NGOs and young representatives cooperated in activities, projects and also jointly contributed to the implementation of events (Danube Participation Day, Young Bled Strategic Forum, Bled Strategic Forum, presentations of EUSDR activities). The networks and activities give special attention to the empowerment of civil society and young leaders, through the establishment of open and safe spaces where they are not only given a seat at the table (together with decision-makers, private sector, academia, media...) but are also listened to and taken into consideration as important societal partners. Together with the Guidance Paper for Youth Participation in the EUSDR facilitated by PA 10 and structural discussions on closer integration of youth within the Danube Region being achieved within the Danube Youth Council Task Force, a strong foundation for cooperation with

young members of the EUSDR is constructed with bottom-up and top-down approaches. Several PAs have stated the intention to involve the Danube Youth Council in their thematic work in the future.

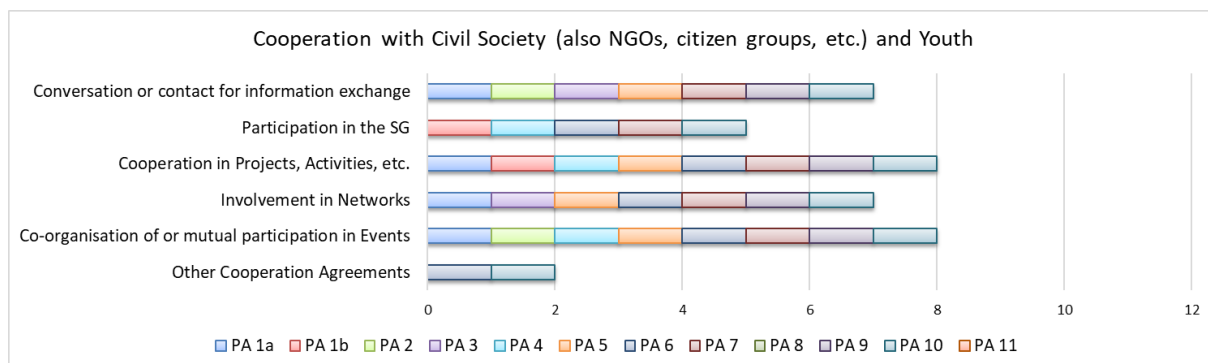


Figure 12: Cooperation with Civil Society and Youth (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

Almost all PAs reported **cooperation with administrative institutions** (see Figure 13), however, the focus lies on different levels. PA 1a, PA 2 or PA 9 for instance highlighted mostly national public authorities that were involved in project activities, research studies, Working Groups or Steering Group meetings, participated in workshops or were informed about the actions and achievements of the respective PA. Examples of national administrative institutions are waterway administrations, border control authorities, RIS providers, transport authorities, national public authorities in the field of sustainable energy or ministries responsible for education and science. Other Priority Areas highlighted local administrative institutions, e.g. PA 5, where many municipalities are involved in projects supported by the Disaster Management Working Group. PA 10 strongly cooperates with administrative institutions in activities for/with civil society and youth, where structural support of different institutions and organisations on local, regional and cross-border levels are essential in their success (both in terms of institutional and financial support). Cooperation with cities and municipalities, regional institutions and cross-border programmes is included in the activities (such as the Danube Participation Day, Young Bled Strategic Forum), SG meetings and other opportunities.

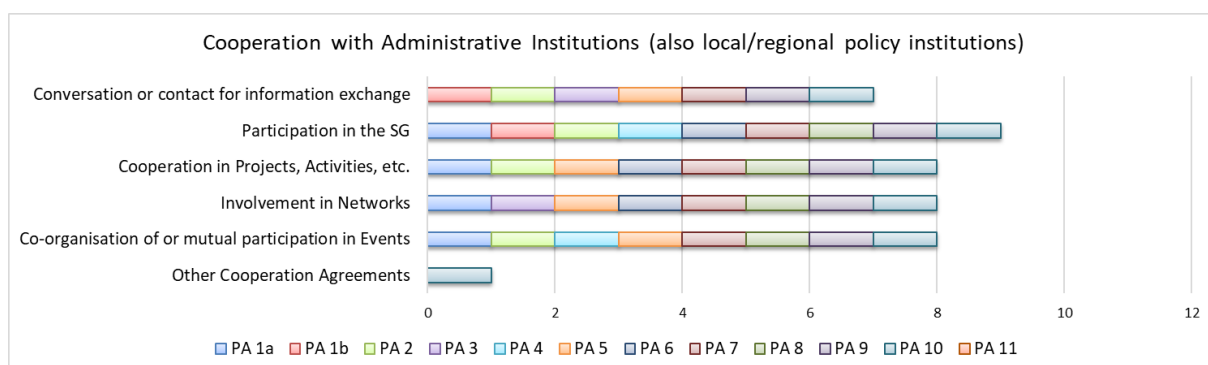


Figure 13: Cooperation with Administrative Institutions (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

Cooperation with national associations is less common among the EUSDR Priority Areas, with only five PAs reporting information exchange and/or involvement of Unions or Chambers in networks, projects or events (see Figure 14). PA 7 cooperates with the Unions of Clusters in national networks supporting the implementation of the Horizon Europe Programme. PA 5 highlighted the cooperation with different civil protection authorities in the Disaster Management Working Group. PA 10 continued the cooperation within existing networks of cooperation with national associations and institutions and searches for other opportunities for cooperation. One of the important long-term initiatives is the

EUSDR ESF Managing Authorities Network in which PA 9 and PA 10 jointly work as a secretariat to the cooperation among interested stakeholders since its establishment in 2015.

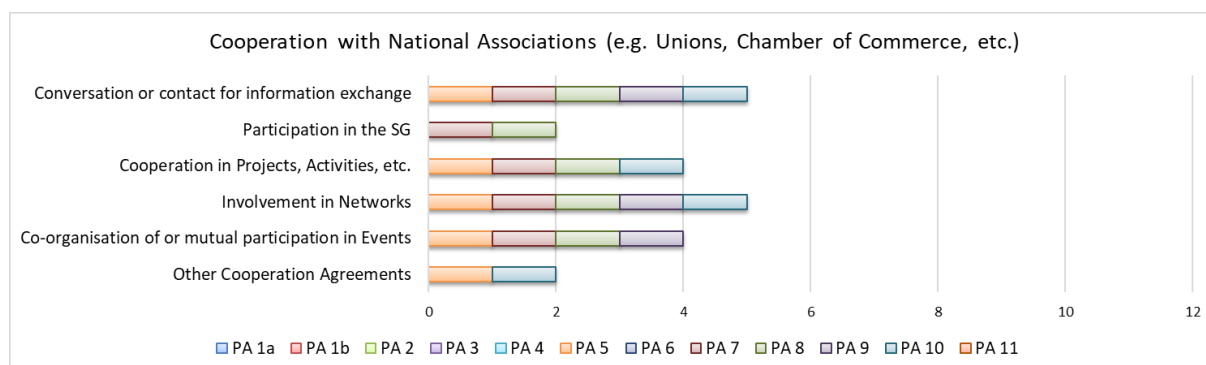


Figure 14: Cooperation with National Associations (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

In total nine PAs reported **cooperation with the business sector** in the reporting period (see Figure 15). Enterprises and private companies are interwoven with the macro-regional strategy in multiple ways and cooperated with EUSDR Priority Areas in activities, mutually organised or participated in events and exchanged information. PA 1a is working closely with the business sector in projects, Working Group meetings and at SG meetings. As the business sector is PA 1a's primary 'customer', the PA is gathering their inputs and feedback regarding all Actions. PA 2 regularly updates private companies on their actions, projects, achievements, events, studies etc. PA 2, PA 4 and PA 5 organised a conference for Hungarian stakeholders where different funding opportunities in the field of energy, water and environment were introduced and numerous companies participated. Further, PA 4, the World Bank and ICPDR jointly organised a workshop on sewage sludge management in the Danube Region and PA 5 participated and gave a presentation at an event organised by the World Bank focusing on water scarcity and drought. PA 10 includes private sector representatives on the basis of their field of expertise and connects them within activities, events, discussions and consultations in order to build cooperation opportunities among all stakeholders. Companies and institutions are also explored as financial partners within the preparation of activities (sponsorship agreements) in order to build on more stable and diversified financial project constructions.

Private companies represent an important field of knowledge and financial partnership that carries big opportunities for the EUSDR. This is also reflected in the number of Priority Areas that intend to further involve the business sector in their activities in order to enhance the implementation of the Strategy. PA 1b, PA 2, PA 5, PA 7 and PA 8 specifically highlighted that **better cooperation with the private sector would be of benefit**. Also PA 10 emphasised that decision-makers need to implement effective dialogue with private sector representatives, as their common values and versatile expertise may generate progress and greater achievements on set goals, as specific challenges may be addressed only through cross-sector cooperation. Equally, the cooperation among civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and especially youth with private sector representatives is necessary in order to jointly search for societal solutions that enable sustainable progress, and enable capacity building and education for young generations entering the workforce. Furthermore, the inclusion of action potential in the field of entrepreneurship and social innovation labs may further benefit the identification of opportunities, project creation and search for long term financial stability.

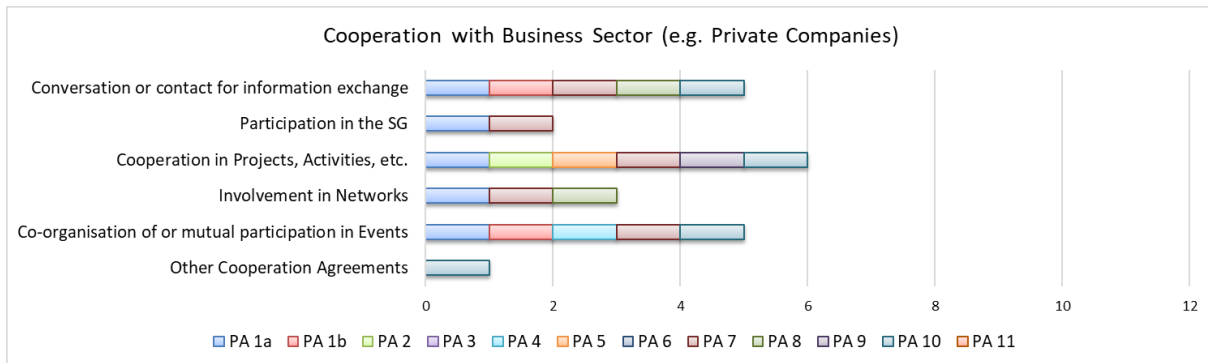


Figure 15: Cooperation with Business Sector (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

Last but not least, several **PAs cooperated with supranational institutions and bodies** such as the UN or the OECD (see Figure 16). PA 1b organises the Danube Region Transport Days on a yearly basis together with UNECE. PA 2 sends regular updates about its activities and achievements to international organisations and cooperated closely with the Energy Community and UNECE during the period. The Energy Community participated in all panels of the NECP workshops and presented their latest activities and focus points during PA 2 SG meetings. The ICPDR, ISRBC, Carpathian Convention and Global Water Partnership representatives were regularly participating in PA 4 and PA 5 activities and SG events and vice versa, PA 4 and PA 5 took part in ICPDR and ISRBC EG meetings. ICPDR and the Permanent Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention are also permanent observers in the PA 6 SG and respectively involved in their activities. The cooperation between ICPDR and PA 6 has been strengthened and intensified in the reporting period by regular information exchange, participation of PA 6 in ICPDR River Basin Management Expert Group meetings and contributions of the ICPDR in PA 6 SG Meetings. Moreover, PA 6 contributed to the development of the Danube River Basin Management Plan (DRBMP) Update 2021 by providing valuable input and feedback. PA 5 gave a presentation at the UN High Level Political Forum 2020's Side event on disaster preparedness activities in the Danube Region. PA 9 has initiated a dialogue with the OECD on the resilience of education systems in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Cooperation with the European Training Foundation (ETF) was deepened, leading to the joint development and launch of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence. PA 9 also continued its active cooperation and mutual exchange with the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE). PA 10 includes representatives of supranational organisations in the SG (with the permanent representation of the EESC, DG REGIO and other participating stakeholders), in joint programme building and event organisation, in joint capacity-building as well as through resources sharing and long-term financial cooperation. Representatives of the European Commission and Parliament (within national representation offices) are consulted in the preparation of major activities in advance, also facilitating the joint creation of programme events, e.g. a joint activity prepared with the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) during the 2021 Young Bled Strategic Forum.

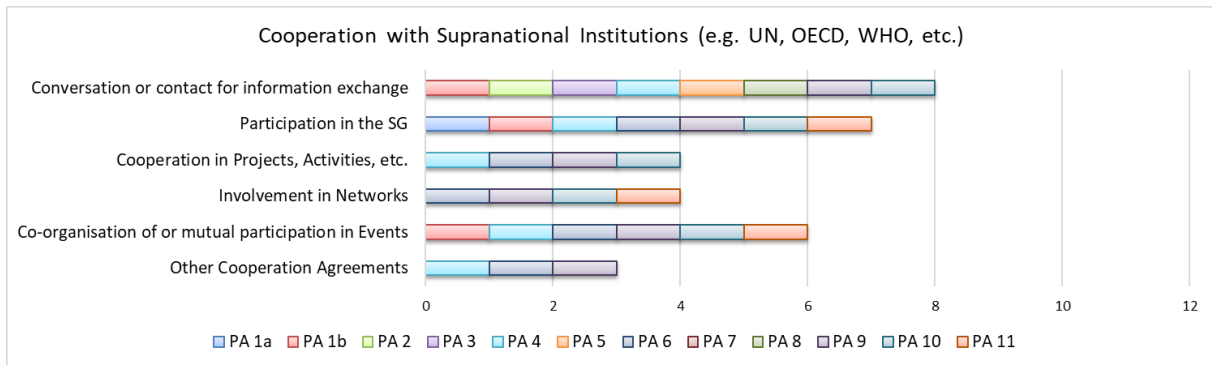


Figure 16: Cooperation with Supranational Institutions (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

Stakeholder cooperation was also tackled in the **EUSDR Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders**¹⁸⁸, which was prepared in 2021. In the course of this analysis, PACs and their teams were invited to fill in a survey, focused on the identification of stakeholders relevant at PA level, as well as on the stakeholders that are needed for an effective implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan. Another aspect covered by the survey referred to a stakeholder mapping based on the cooperation stages with the identified categories of stakeholders¹⁸⁹. The mapping created by the PACs and their teams as well as the graphic illustration (see Figure 17) serve as an overview of the PA cooperation structures in order to see potentials and, if necessary, to consolidate, deepen or establish new cooperation patterns. The exercise was about presenting the diversity of stakeholders, regardless of their level of significance to the implementation of the PA (stakeholder list). It is also important to note that each PA overview depends on the context of the respective PA, so that a low cooperation level does not necessarily mean that cooperation is not as good as at a higher cooperation level.



¹⁸⁸ EUSDR Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders. [Online](#).

¹⁸⁹ Identified categories of stakeholders in the survey include: funding institutions, relevant line DGs, civil society/NGOs/social partners, regional/local authorities, transnational institutions, projects and Poles of the DTP, experts/observers/consultants, private sector/businesses/SMEs, academia/think tanks and others.



Figure 17: Overview of stakeholder mapping per PA (Source: EUSDR Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders)

4.5.Strategic Policy Development

The activities of the Strategy have multiple effects in the EUSDR participating countries. At international, EU, MRS, national and regional levels, the political support and participation (within the Joint Declarations of Ministers and the proceedings of the Annual Fora or other activities) may be identified as important commitments and agreements of shared cooperation, that are not possible in other established networks. Furthermore, specific developments within Priority Areas through technical cooperation, synergies creation and exchange of best practices, joint normative establishment and networking contribute to the harmonisation of standards, joint solution building and prosperity creation in a unique setting of cross-border and MRS cooperation.

In the reporting period, several **international/multilateral agreements and commitments** have been influenced by the EUSDR. For instance, in the waterways sector (**Pillar 1 – Connecting the Region**), a main output of PA 1a was the 2020 Danube Ministerial Conclusions, which signifies a further commitment of the Danube transport ministers to secure proper waterway maintenance in their respective countries.

In the field of **environmental protection (Pillar 2)**, PA 4 and PA 6 contributed to the third Danube River Basin Management Plan prepared in the framework of the International Convention on the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). E.g. the PA 6 Danube Sturgeon Task Force (DSTF) lobbied for Danube Sturgeon conservation measures as an observer to the ICPDR and suggested several proposals for improvement in the update of the River Basin Management Plan, which were taken up in the plan. DSTF also lobbied for passable fish corridors at the Iron Gate dam and the Gabčíkovo dam and as such directly addressed national and EU authorities. Furthermore, the DSTF issued a Position Paper on Ban on sturgeon fishing in the Danube Basin (2020) and subsequent coverage of the whole basin by bans adopted by States (2021). DSTF also cooperated with the EC (DG MARE) and the General Fisheries Council for the Mediterranean on a monitoring of sturgeons by-catch in Black Sea Fisheries and possible control measures and generally with the EC (DG ENV and DG REGIO) on EU political and financial support for sturgeon conservation. Moreover, PA 5 was deeply involved in the coordination of regional cooperation in the field of disaster response.

PA 7, PA 8 and PA 9 combined efforts to overcome the gap between up- and downstream Danube Region countries via better embedding of **Pillar 3 – Building Prosperity** into suitable funding instruments within the new MFF (2021-2027). In this regard, a joint position paper¹⁹⁰ addressing the EC and EUSDR NCs was prepared, presented and circulated among the relevant addressees. Similarly, PA 7 addressed the issue of reducing the remuneration gaps for researchers in the Horizon Europe Programme and prepared an Analysis on Participation of the Danube Region Countries in Horizon

¹⁹⁰ Joint Proposals of PA 7, PA 8 and PA 9 to the EC and the NCs of the EUSDR. Better embedding of the EUSDR's prosperity pillar into suitable funding instruments within the new MFF (2021-2027). [Online](#).

2020¹⁹¹ including recommendations for increasing participation for national as well as EU level policy makers. PA 9 highlighted existing cooperation platforms and networks that have been involved, in particular the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE). Mutual exchange and cooperation have been ongoing since the beginning of the implementation of PA 9. Moreover, the proposal for a Council Decision on the position to be taken on behalf of the EU in the Association Council established under the Association Agreement between the EU and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part, mentions the EUSDR at several occasions.

In **Pillar 4 – Strengthening the Region** – the work of PA 11 is interrelated with platforms and initiatives in the field of home affairs like the Salzburg Forum, which was founded in 2001 between nine EU countries as a platform for dialogue and cooperation in the area of internal security. PA 11 took part in the consultations for the new Strategic Document called The Salzburg Forum Vision 2030. In the context of this process a reference was made to other cross-cutting initiatives and the need to search synergies of possibilities offered by the EUSDR as well as of other regional cooperation platforms and organisations, e.g. Brdo Process, Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe (PCC SEE) or International centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), etc.

In total five Priority Areas reported that their **PA was considered in policy documents** such as reports or declarations (see Figure 18). The regarding documents are e.g. the third Danube River Basin Management Plan prepared in the framework of the ICPDR (PA 4), the Strategy of Scientific and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2021 to 2025 – ‘Power of Knowledge’ (PA 7), ERI SEE work programme, bilateral declarations/memoranda of understanding and reports of OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation (PA 9), the Guidance Paper for Youth Participation (PA 10) as well as the Declaration of the Transport Ministers on effective waterway rehabilitation and maintenance (PA 1a and PA 11). Also, the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan update 2021 prepared by ICPDR refers to EUSDR PA 5 in more than 20 cases.

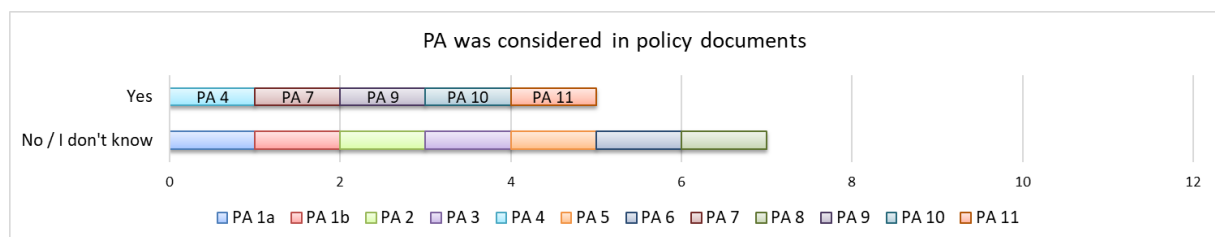


Figure 18: Consideration in policy documents (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

Similarly, five Priority Areas reported that **processes were generated that initiated/contributed to policy changes**, e.g., change of focus in institutions, institutionalised processes, new institutionalised cooperation, new agreements, new memberships, etc. (see Figure 19).

- PA 1a supports the Danube-wide application of EU Directive 2017/2397 on the recognition of professional qualifications in inland navigation and started a process aimed at supporting Danube countries with the implementation of the technical requirements of the EU Directive, namely the set-up of National Crew Databases. In some countries, this process triggered the administrations to take a close look at the implementation of the databases and start their national procurement procedures.

¹⁹¹ Participation of the Danube Region Countries in Horizon 2020. Analysis. [Online](#).

- In the course of the continuous development of the cooperation with PA 1a and PA 11, positive effects were spread at national level. For example, the Bulgarian Ministry of Interior imitated the involvement of representatives of the Ministry of Transport and River Ports Infrastructure Management for the introduction of measures which fall in the capacity of their department.
- PA 4 highlighted its observer status in the Danube Sturgeon Task Force and in the Carpathian Convention Climate Change Working Group.
- The PA 5 Disaster Management Working Group has gained new members in the reporting period.
- PA 10 highlighted that the Network of ESF Managing Authorities managed to further develop in view of the funding period 2021-2027. PA 9 and PA 10 worked together with the ESF+ Managing Authorities in the Danube Region to formulate a text module on macro-regional cooperation in the Operational Programmes. Likewise, the network defined eight topics for transnational cooperation in the ESF+ in the Danube Region. In 2021, the network discussed geographic coverage and concrete topics for thematic cooperation in preparation to define concrete steps and formats for transnational cooperation (e.g. through calls, capitalisation activities, good practice exchange etc.).

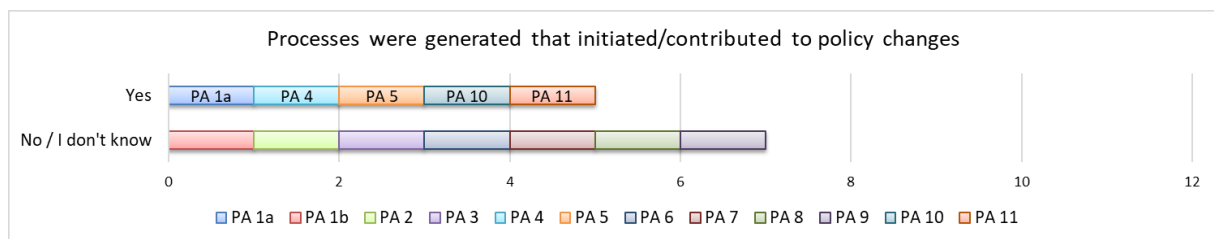


Figure 19: Policy changes generated (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

In a few cases, **Priority Areas' activities contributed to a legislative change**, e.g. regulations or directives (see Figure 20). At national level in Bulgaria the introduction of the three DAVID forms for facilitation of border controls along the Danube necessitated some changes at the national legislation in order to allow for introduction of the harmonised forms. Furthermore, some ongoing processes for potential legislative changes were highlighted. E.g. representatives of PA 1a are involved in the discussions around the revision of the TEN-T Regulation (EU) No 1315/2013 to set realistic targets for the achievement of minimum requirements regarding European waterways. PA 4 highlighted the study on sewage sludge which was provided to DG ENV in 2021 and could contribute to the update/revision of the relevant EU legislation in the frame of public consultation. PA 10 stressed the Guidance Paper for Youth Participation, which provides concrete proposals to support youth involvement in the regional development in the Danube Region.

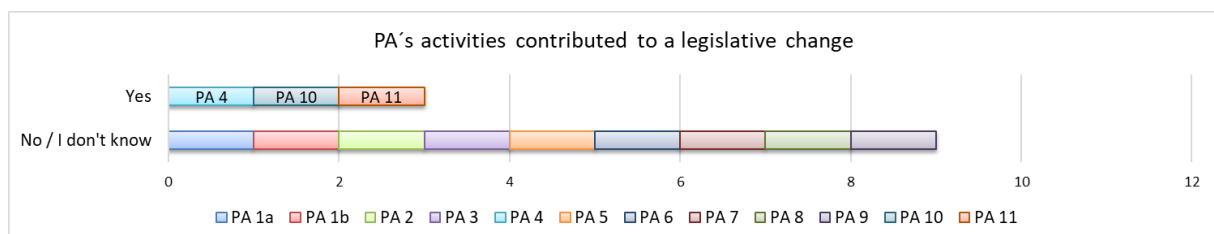


Figure 20: Legislative changes (Source: own figure based on PAC reporting)

5. Conclusions and Outlook

The beginning of the reporting period 2020-2021 coincided with the unprecedented **COVID-19 pandemic** that brought serious economic, social and financial impact on all EUSDR countries. The pandemic and its effects from travel restrictions, lack of tourists and economic recession to interrupted global value chains and new EU instruments have had a significant influence on implementing the EUSDR Action Plan¹⁹². The development of macro-regional strategies relies on personal contacts and meetings to discuss and coordinate processes, achieve better results, capitalise and focus on crucial issues such as the preparation of common projects, policy papers, analyses or recommendations. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of the EUSDR and the lessons learnt are summarised in the following paragraphs.

- During 2020 and 2021 most activities were carried out online and even if interested persons joined the events online, the lack of physical meetings has been affecting the necessary personal relations. One of the disadvantages of the online events/meetings was especially the difficulty in establishing good communication for new EUSDR stakeholders. While longstanding network cooperation could be adapted by developing online formats to facilitate exchange and cooperation, it had a detrimental effect on establishing new networks that were relying on first establishing the personal contact to create trust. After two years of virtual meetings, most PACs and NCs highlighted the importance of personal contact and are looking forward to meeting face to face again.
- On the other hand, online meetings proved to be effective and a useful tool because they are easy to organise, cost efficient and more people can participate. In some PAs, coordination meetings between PACs and/or other stakeholders have become more frequent. Virtual and hybrid meetings will remain after the pandemic in one way or another. As one National Coordinator highlighted, the EUSDR should aim to develop a balance between more frequent, short digital meetings for coordination and information exchange, but also high-quality in-person conferences such as the Annual Forum to allow for direct exchange and joint development of new ideas and connections. It was also highlighted that hybrid events proved to be a good opportunity to increase the number of participants and allow participation in more (thematic) events to collect relevant information.
- Some activities of the Priority Areas could not be carried out online and had to be adjusted, postponed or cancelled. PA 11 e.g. had to cancel several events, among which the Ministerial conference of the Interior Ministers from the EUSDR which was scheduled for April 2020 and carefully planned a year before.
- Also, the outreach to specific target groups and networking with relevant stakeholders was significantly limited due to the restrictions in travelling and organising public meetings. Thus, the overall visibility of the EUSDR has been reduced.
- Moreover, the pandemic had a tremendous impact on the labour markets and education systems in the Danube Region. Good practice examples from MRS regarding home schooling and e-learning were collected by PA 9 in cooperation with PA 7 and made available online¹⁹³. Also, PA 5 encouraged the development of e-learning materials within the framework of different projects.

¹⁹² Spatial Foresight (2022), Policy/impact evaluation of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region. [Online](#).

¹⁹³ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/homeschooling/>

- In the energy field, some important priority topics arose that should be tackled during the next reporting period, such as the question of the balance of the grid which changed dramatically due to the pandemic.

As illustrated in chapter 2, despite the obvious negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on personal contacts, networking and coordination, EUSDR core stakeholders have brought forward the Strategy in major fields. In the beginning of 2020 the **adoption of the revised EUSDR Action Plan** has laid the cornerstone for moving forward with several EUSDR activities and processes such as **embedding** the EUSDR into EU funded programmes, the setting up of a new **monitoring system** and strengthened **communication**. Other achievements in the reporting period 2020-2021 were an updated **evaluation plan** and EUSDR internal and cross-MRS **capacity building**. Moreover, the process on identifying and listing **strategic projects and processes** (Danube Strategy Flagships) and **youth involvement** were high on the agenda of the EUSDR and will be further developed in the upcoming reporting period. Overall, the EUSDR has proven to be a **stable and resilient governance framework** also in times of crisis and has served as an important anchor for macro-regional cooperation in the Danube Region during the pandemic. The DTP governance financing and continuous EC support played important roles. According to several PACs and NCs, the DSP has proven to be a success and the key element of the well-functioning EUSDR-governance system.

Chapter 3 has shown various **developments and achievements at Priority Area** level to improve connectivity, environmental protection, prosperity, governance and security in the Danube Region. All PAs reported progress on activities under the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and are confident that most targets and objectives will be achieved accordingly. Even if the COVID-19 pandemic stopped some activities, the PAs managed to continue with most of their activities and thematic work. Beside the achievements in each Priority Area, the **contribution of the EUSDR to wider policy objectives** is worth mentioning. Macro-regional cooperation within the EUSDR provides an important contribution to key EU policy priorities, including EU Cohesion Policy Objectives, the European Green Deal and digital transition. The EUSDR further plays an important role in the EU Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy, as it enables **collaboration between EU Member States and non-EU countries** on an equal footing. The EUSDR, therefore, represents an important element of structural cooperation among EU and non-EU countries and an important step towards EU accession.

In chapter 4 an overview of key aspects across Priority Areas was presented. With respect to the **horizontal frames**, digitalisation gained a great boost within the reporting period, but also climate change and sustainable development have been addressed by almost all PAs. EUSDR Priority Areas **capitalised on previous results** in various ways in order to further develop the PA and its policies. Almost all PAs built new activities on results of previous activities, linked new activities, processes or projects within or among PAs/Pillars as well as with regional/national/transnational activities. In 2020 and 2021, **46 Steering Group meetings** were held across the 12 Priority Areas. However, participation in SG meetings varies between Priority Areas and countries and remains a challenge also in this reporting period for several PAs. **Cooperation among EUSDR main stakeholders** was mainly described as smooth and efficient. Depending on the context of each Priority Area, PAs also cooperated with **other stakeholders such as academia, civil society, administrative institutions** etc. and reported different forms of involvement such as information exchange, cooperation in projects or in events. Several PAs highlighted that better cooperation with the private sector would be of benefit. When it comes to **policy impact**, the activities of the Strategy had multiple effects at international, EU, MRS, national and regional levels. E.g. some international/multilateral agreements and commitments have been influenced by the EUSDR and some PAs were considered in policy documents. Examples of

processes that initiated/contributed to policy changes or legislative changes are rather limited, but exist in some Priority Areas, as illustrated in chapter 4.5.

EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators reported several **ongoing challenges** that still exist in different areas. According to the PACs and NCs, improvements are necessary mainly regarding participation in Steering Groups, awareness and commitment, embedding, cross-PA cooperation and exchanges among different MRS and other networks. Furthermore, other issues such as the importance of a functioning governance system, less administrative burden and enhanced cooperation with non-EU-countries were highlighted in order to increase the impact of the EUSDR. The following paragraphs briefly summarise each of these topics.

Participation in Steering Groups

An issue which still persists in many Priority Areas is the high fluctuation, low attendance and limited participation in Steering Groups on behalf of certain participating states. Some PAs found an increased participation in 2020-2021 due to online meetings, other PAs however reported that even online SG meetings during the pandemic did not contribute to a higher participation. It is further observed that some designated SG members have limited influence in their ministries and are thus depending on their hierarchy to take decisions. While National Coordinators acknowledge the necessity to ensure continuity and stability of national structures for the implementation of macro-regional strategies, there is a multitude of reasons for this issue: the topics discussed being too general, topics found not to be relevant for the implementation of the Strategy in the respective country, lack of time and other resources, frequent staff changes in the line ministries and therefore lack of institutional knowledge and memory and also weak mandates in Steering Groups. All this can result in a lack of quota for decision-making and in holding-up the implementation of the Strategy. Mobilisation and motivation of SG members and stakeholders requires continuous attention:

- As already pointed out in the past EUSDR Implementation Reports, administrative conditions on national level can hardly be influenced by NCs or PACs. It is all the more important to foster transparent and continuous communication among active Steering Group members (be it on project ideas, joint events, SG meetings or organisational issues) in order to strengthen institutional memory and exchange.
- Some PACs put special emphasis on facilitating a better involvement of SG members, for example through dedicated workshops, online surveys, extensive capacity building, support and information sharing. Others report that the regular delivery of policy monitoring reports facilitates participation in Steering Groups.
- The establishment and development of Working Groups/Task Forces (see chapter 4.3) is also considered a good practice in this regard and proved to be useful for obtaining expert knowledge, developing project ideas, learning how to approach national policies and absorbing funding sources.

Further information on this topic can also be found in the Needs assessment on engaging SG members¹⁹⁴, published in 2021 by the DSP.

Outreach to stakeholders and political commitment

Another persisting challenge is the low visibility and recognition of the EUSDR in the participating countries, in the sectorial ministries and in the overall public. The political commitment towards the

¹⁹⁴ DSP, 2020: EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Needs Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs). [Online](#).

Strategy continues to be considered as rather weak and the danger of losing momentum persists. The reasons for this are manifold and among others the low impact of MRS, which is also related to the three NOs, or the perception of the EUSDR as a political mechanism generating soft activities (like networks or events) have been emphasised by the PACs and NCs. Also, a lack of policy coherence on national levels was pointed out. Further persisting weakness mentioned is that objectives of the Strategy do not catalyse enough into the work of the SGs, and their work does not enough translates into concrete projects and outputs, be it funded by the EU or national projects or joint political initiatives of relevant sectorial policies.

In order to raise the visibility of the EUSDR, continuous promotion of the EUSDR and Priority Areas as well as convincing activities on the ground are needed. Other solutions pointed out by the stakeholders are listed below.

- A direct link and interaction between policy making and project activities on the ground is crucial for the success of the EUSDR. Only if the policy process is fed with targeted project results and only if projects are embedded in clear policy settings, the EUSDR targets will be achieved. The Priority Area Coordinators play a crucial role in connecting the policy and project level.
- A solution that has been pointed out several times is a higher involvement from the EC and strong support of the line DGs. Some work has been done in the past, but the potential has not yet been fully utilised and more awareness of MRS in the line DGs would support raising visibility and political commitment.
- It was also highlighted that MRS as such are set to implement the EU policies, but on the specific macro-regional level targeting the most important issues for MRS that need transnational solutions. MRS should not be treated as projects.
- Another suggestion was to raise political awareness by embedding the EUSDR better into the geopolitical context. This includes efforts of bridging into the EU's wider policy objectives and its specific territorial implications for the Danube Region and of exploring untapped potentials for enhanced cooperation (including building enhanced partnerships with other formats of international cooperation in the Danube Region/South-East-Europe), like on Enlargement, European Green Deal, post-COVID-19 priorities, etc.
- Stronger political support is essential. Defining more clearly the stakeholder's roles and mandates could be one step up to support the leverage the stronger political commitment on national levels.
- It will be crucial for the EUSDR and its Priority Areas to find a clear and implementation wise realistic role within the hierarchy of different national, international, regional and local bodies. The lead of PAs should be appointed to individuals equipped with sufficient decision-making powers within the Ministries and institutions, supported by a team of experts and ideally a 'technical secretariat'. Financing of the PAs should be made available for key projects with clear added value for the macro-region. In this respect, a possible 'technical secretariat' could be established as a legal body with decision-making rights and duties laid out in Rules of Procedure (RoP).
- The Strategy has been of much use to mobilise political capital within the Danube Region and to institutionalise networks of cooperation among stakeholders on many levels, which would not have taken place otherwise. However, progress often takes place in an incremental way, based on the efforts of highly engaged individuals and well-designed projects rather than by a

strategic process geared by a top-down steering mechanism, as in parts originally envisaged. More support for PACs could help in devising a more strategic approach.

- Conferences of the Danube Parliamentarians hosted by the country holding the Presidency of EUSDR could help to reach a higher political impact and put MRS into the focus of parliaments and politicians.
- Organising workshops and participating in larger (international) events (e.g. EU Green Week) raises interest for participants outside of the Strategy and is to be considered as a good practice for the future, also to be further engaged with policy makers.
- Also, communication trainings provided by Interact and the DSP have been mentioned as helpful in order to get to know partners from other programmes and regions, exchange experiences and ideas on how to better communicate the PA's efforts, successes and results, how to communicate with various stakeholders, etc.

During this reporting period, the foundation for intensified communication activities was laid with the elaboration of the EUSDR Communication Strategy and its implementation. Furthermore, previously existing communication activities via internet, social media, newsletters and publications, as well as communication in the framework of meetings and events were continued and new tools like the EUSDR Smart App or the Intranet were introduced. In the upcoming reporting period, communication is to be further strengthened. A new tool for internal and external communication of the Strategy and for raising the visibility of the EUSDR's achievements are the Danube Strategy Flagships. The promotion of strategic projects and processes via Danube Strategy Flagships, potentially steered jointly by several PAs, could provide an opportunity to demonstrate improvement in the Region that is induced by cooperation and thus create political momentum.

Cross-PA cooperation

The potential for cross-PA cooperation is high and some positive developments have already taken place in this area. However, this approach was mainly left to the PAs themselves, which do not always have capacities to push this issue forward. Cross-cutting issues among PAs should be strengthened both on policy and project level. In this regard, the wish for the DSP to act as a coordinating body and facilitate better communication between PAs was pointed out by several stakeholders. Possible topics for cross-PA cooperation are, among others, digitalisation, sustainability or other cross-cutting issues.

- Cross-cutting work between the PAs/SGs seems necessary, as the real challenges are mostly to be found in the interrelation between different themes and disciplines. In this regard, an overall orientation should be provided in order to support the PAs during the process. This could also involve the political level.
- Several EUSDR topics have a strong link to territorial and urban development. In complement, EU policies like digitalisation, the European Green Deal, brain drain, etc. require specific 'territorialisation' for application/implementation in the Danube Region. Linking MRS with the Territorial Agenda and renewed Urban Agenda/Leipzig Charter processes could be useful. Linking in future ESPON projects will stay important.
- In addition, the EUSDR should strive to define potential policy fields where the existing partnerships and networks could play a useful role in responding to new strategic challenges. E.g. contributing to post-COVID and post-war related challenges could be tackled in a cross-PA approach.
- Another point raised by a National Coordinator was to strengthen again the visionary element in the EUSDR debates. Future development perspectives could be highlighted more in the

thematic work. Evaluation results and visionary projects like ESPON territorial visions could be a starting point in this respect.

Funding/Embedding

The lack of direct funding for projects and processes generated or recommended under the Priority Areas or, in other words, embedding MRS into EU funded programmes has been raised as a persisting challenge by many PACs and NCs. In the reporting period, the embedding process was improved substantially and a lot was brought forward in this regard, as illustrated in chapter 2.2 and Annex I. However, the process requires ongoing efforts and needs to be further tackled in the next years. In 2020 and 2021 a major task was the preparation for the programming period 2021-2027 and embedding the EUSDR strategic topics into relevant programming documents. In the upcoming reporting period, the focus will move to the implementation phase, where actual projects are implemented. A major task in this regard will also be the monitoring of the embedding process to keep track of calls and projects with relevance for the EUSDR. According to the PACs and NCs, more work needs to be done especially when it comes to mainstream programmes and EU centrally managed programmes to become more relevant sources of funding for EUSDR. In this regard, the necessity of active support by the European Commission was also expressed.

- NCs have no influence on embedding of MRS into the centrally managed programmes such as LIFE, Horizon Europe or Erasmus+. Therefore, a stronger EC support is needed.
- Embedding the priorities of MRS into mainstream EU funds is a matter of their ultimate survival. The success of embedding depends on continuous involvement of national programming authorities in the work of MRS. Thus, the MRS community needs to find a way to address programming authorities more effectively.
- Results of transnational projects should be better channelled into and adapted by centrally managed, CBC, or mainstream national programmes to create project chains.
- National OPs can provide direct funds to build the capacities of EUSDR stakeholders (like the Public Administration and Civil Service Development OP 2016-2021). This good practice is planned to be sustained in Hungary via the Implementation OP Plus.
- The success of PA 6 was to set up Task Forces as interphase platforms for dealing with specific topics. Task Forces are considered to be a best practice example within the EUSDR and beyond, and motivated stakeholders are involved in the concrete implementation. The lack of funding (3 NOs) however represents an obstacle in its implementation and the commitment of the work of the Task Forces for long-term results and long-term motivation. The Task Forces' contribution should be acknowledged and rewarded in an appropriate manner, otherwise these structures risk not being able to exist in the long term. It is enormous what could be achieved together with the stakeholders despite the three NOs, but the work is based on voluntary contributions of the stakeholders. It is time for professionalisation and a change in thinking with regard to the three NOs. The latter may have been justified at the beginning of the MRS from the standpoint of that time, but MRS have evolved and the policy level should adapt accordingly.
- Innovation Express 2021 can be considered as a best practice example of a synchronised call. Innovation Express 2021 is a joint call for proposals implemented within the framework of the four MRS, initiated by the EUSBSR Policy Area 'Education, Science and Social affairs' and the EUSDR PA 8. The call is funded by existing national/regional funding programmes and managed

by participating funding agencies to initiate, develop or enhance transnational exchange activities among applicants and their project proposals to be funded.

Exchange among different macro-regional strategies and other networks

As an instrument for multilateral cooperation, macro-regional strategies are the prime test case of what territorial cohesion means in practical terms. The first meeting of four Presidencies and TRIOs of EU MRS as initiated by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency, within the EC's MRS Week in Brussels, brought together the Presidencies of all four Strategies, supported by the EC and jointly organised by the Danube Strategy Point and INTERACT. This initiative was aiming to explore possibilities and interest to establish a platform for structured and continuous exchanges among the chairpersons of National Coordination groups ((TRIO) Presidencies) and the European Commission that would contribute to strengthened political leadership of the EU macro-regional strategies towards internal governance and external stakeholders. Moreover, this network could strengthen coordination and streamline approaches on processes and horizontal topics relevant for all macro-regions. The discussion and reports from all four Strategies has shown the following topics that may be further explored and discussed: 1. Political commitment towards MRS and Governance; 2. Embedding; 3. Support structures of MRS; 4. Capacity Building and Communication.

This new format of cooperation has resulted in the last two years with more exchange among the four macro-regional strategies and with other networks of regional cooperation. This includes more joint activities, events and opportunities for the exchange of experience, best practices and joint solution building. Cooperation on best practices, shared capacity building, knowledge exchange and the search for joint solutions among MRS can contribute to the development of more comprehensive, engaging and fruitful activities, that enable the build-up of prosperity through diversity in the Danube Region and beyond. At thematic level, some Priority Areas have already implemented such cooperation with the support of Interact or on a personal basis, but structural support within European networks and activities would contribute to a higher degree of knowledge spill-over and cooperation. Also a more unified and commonly agreed approach to embedding across all MRS would be beneficial.

However, there are also critical voices, stating that the usefulness of cross-cutting cooperation among MRS is limited to an expert-level exchange on practicalities and governance structures. Beyond this, meta-level debates and concepts on cross-cutting cooperation are deemed too abstract.

According to another NC, unification and a harmonised approach to all MRS could be a solution, especially in the cases of different names, governance support structures and the composition of National Coordinators.

- Structurally, more harmonisation and unification across MRS would help coordination and cooperation between the Strategies, especially for countries that participate in more than one MRS. This would also encourage a more concrete and structured exchange across MRS on specific topics. The exchanges among the four TRIO Presidencies are seen as very general and random. It was suggested to establish more permanent and deliberate exchange formats (like cross-MRS groups) in thematic fields and on topics such as governance structures, capacity building, communication etc.

Other lessons learnt

In addition to the above-mentioned points, several other **good practices and lessons learnt** have been reported by some NCs and PACs, such as the importance of a functioning governance system, simple administrative processes and enhanced cooperation with non-EU-countries.

Regarding the **governance system**, the great importance of having a robust, balanced and efficient governance support structure with all key functions organised within a single body to withstand current and future challenges was raised by some NCs and PACs. Especially in times of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or, most recently, the war in Ukraine, support structures need not only to react quickly but also to help ensure the stability of implementation of the Strategy. Given both the diversity and complexity of the EUSDR governance it is of utmost importance for the Strategy to continue to benefit from the principles of continuity, professionalism and accountability embedded in the current governance support structure. The governance support structures also play a key role in capacity building for countries that need it, especially those holding Presidency, or for new stakeholders. The DSP has managed to assert this role well and this has been recognised by participating countries and PACs.

- Stable framework conditions for cooperation at all levels and in all countries remain a precondition for an effective MRS work. Exploring and ensuring all kind of synergies and potentials with Interreg DTP in the programming and during the implementation phase is crucial in this respect. EUSDR-DTP governance should advance further along the needs for implementing EUSDR priorities, in particular for the EUSDR governance support.
- The continuity in terms of political priorities (of each Presidency) could be further improved. There is partly also a lack of continuity of staff on SG level, which hinders progress of work. The role of the DSP and the potential of DTP support should be fully exploited.

Some PACs further highlighted that it is essential to keep governance, monitoring, reporting and financial structures as simple and effective as possible and to focus on concrete project related results. Excessive **administrative burden** at any level should be avoided. During the reporting period, this was considerably improved when DTP eMS was introduced. In the upcoming reporting period the introduction of the new EUSDR monitoring system, which brings together different reporting strands in one comprehensive online tool, should further simplify reporting the progress and achievements of EUSDR Priority Areas. In some countries, public procurement procedures are still considered as an obstacle for smooth Strategy implementation, as the processes are often lengthy and complicated. Another point highlighted in order to increase the impact of the Strategy was 'to avoid bureaucratic exercises and to focus not only on projects, but also on what can be realistically achieved in a macro-regional framework'.

- After more than 10 years of implementation, realistic goals for Priority Areas should be set. With other words, this requires increased human and financial resources or less demanding tasks.

In the strategic debate, the EUSDR is considered a valuable element for supporting the enlargement process and the implementation of the EU Neighbourhood Policy by further enhancing **cooperation with non-EU-countries**. Representatives of the non-EU countries within the Danube Region Strategy acknowledge that their participation in the Strategy is very helpful in getting accustomed to processes and communication within the European Union. At the same time, they express their need to further strengthen capacities regarding internal coordination, handling administrative tasks and decision-making processes. When it comes to project participation and implementation by non-EU countries, it has been pointed out on the part of both NCs and PACs that there is still work to be done.

- Policy development as well as strengthening the coordination between policies thematically relevant for the EUSDR and bringing closer links to the EU are seen as a necessity. The main problems at national and macro-regional level are related to lack of funding and lack of formal framework for policy alignment. In order to overcome these issues, the creation of networks

would be appreciated. The Strategy's role is of utmost importance for the alignment of policy areas compatible with the negotiation chapters, and serves as a tool for a faster EU enlargement process.

- EUSDR and EUSAIR should jointly support the EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans.
- For IPA countries it is necessary to ensure continuity and stability of national structures implementing the complex EU policy. This needs MRS experts supporting the implementation of the Strategy.
- MRS are a very useful tool of country preparation for EU accession and aim to ensure that accession countries and territories adopt a coordinated approach in tackling common challenges. One IPA country pointed out that as such it could be used more efficiently. A more proactive role of national representatives within Steering Groups is needed, together with national representatives of EU and non-EU member states in order to exchange opinions and experiences and to boost EU integration process in the best possible way.
- One IPA country further suggested that the EUSDR should be revised in a more flexible manner in order to respond swiftly in changing periods and crisis. Having in mind that an MRS serves as an open and agile platform for strategic networking and strives to gather other actors, the inclusion of relevant initiatives with regional components (Regional Cooperation Council, Transport Community etc.) for further coordination and cooperation would be welcomed.
- Additional funding through existing financial instruments should be accessible, but also extensive involvement in programmes in expensive policy areas such as connectivity and environment should be proposed to the Western Balkan countries, especially in these challenging times when small economies face lagging productivity and competitiveness.

In view of 2022, it is important to mention that Ukraine and all its residents represent partners in the EUSDR family, its activities, projects and networks that have been hindered due to an impermissible act of violence and breach of humanitarian law since 24 February 2022. Ukraine was holding the Presidency of the EUSDR at the time of the military attack, and was forced to temporarily stop the implementation of comprehensive and ambitious activities Ukrainian stakeholders have set forward within the Presidency 2022. The EUSDR plays an important role in the EU accession process through structural cooperation among EU and non-EU countries. The EUSDR will continue to be an engaging and progressive platform for decision-makers, civil society, young representatives, local communities, regional bodies, academia and many stakeholders to jointly contribute to the creation of prosperity through the diversity of the Danube Region. The EUSDR network does its utmost to contribute to the help and assistance of Ukraine and its people.



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