

Conceptual Paper

Political and Thematic Priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Motto: Bridging Regions, Better Cohesion: A Stronger Danube for All

Context and Rationale

The Danube Region, encompassing both EU Member States and EU candidate countries, is a geographic space of significant strategic importance for Europe's cohesion, stability, and sustainable development. In light of this, the Bulgarian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) seeks to promote a renewed political focus on reducing disparities across the Region. Recognising the EUSDR as a valuable platform for dialogue, coordination, and cooperation that significantly informs and supports policy development, Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency aims to capitalise on this framework to advance shared objectives aligned with EU values and regional priorities.

The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will build on the achievements of previous EUSDR Presidencies, which have laid strong foundations for strengthened cooperation, policy dialogue, and strategic alignment in the Danube Region. It will continue to further drive forward the political momentum and thematic in-depth implementation achieved so far, while emphasising emerging regional needs and perspectives in response to current regional as well as European challenges and opportunities. Through this approach, the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency reaffirms its commitment to continuity, ownership and evolution within the EUSDR framework.

Political Focus: Reducing Disparities Through Enhanced Cohesion and Integration

Bulgaria will place a strong political emphasis on the role of the EUSDR as a strategic framework for reducing economic, social, and territorial disparities in the Danube Region. This objective is closely linked to the EU cohesion policy framework and the overarching principle that no region should be left behind. As disparities persist – particularly in peripheral, rural, and cross-border areas – the EUSDR provides a unique platform for fostering coordination and solidarity among the participating countries. In this context, Bulgaria will advocate for a stronger alignment between the EUSDR and the EU cohesion policy framework to ensure a more integrated and impactful regional development process.

The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will promote the Strategy as a platform for identifying shared regional challenges, facilitating joint solutions, and enhancing policy coherence across borders. Reducing regional disparities will be treated as a horizontal objective, integrated within the EUSDR four Pillars – Connecting the Region, Protecting the Environment, Building Prosperity, and Strengthening the Region – and across all twelve Priority Areas. The Presidency will also support greater cooperation and mutual learning between regions at different stages of development, encouraging knowledge transfer and capacity building.

Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will advocate for the stronger alignment between EUSDR priorities with EU as well as national/regional programming, including in the context of the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework. By promoting a more effective embedding of macro-regional goals into EU funding programmes, the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency aims to foster a more integrated, impactful, and inclusive development process – one that enhances territorial cohesion and promotes balanced growth throughout the Danube Region.

Recognising the role of the Danube Region Strategy as a catalyst for bridging gaps between more and less developed regions, the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will focus on the following key areas:

- **Bridging development gaps through enhanced strategic focus on regional disparities:**

The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will place regional disparities at the core of its political focus, recognising them as a persistent challenge to cohesion, competitiveness, and stability in the Danube Region. The Presidency will utilise the EUSDR as a political platform to foster strategic dialogue to better address the uneven development patterns across the macro-region – between urban and rural areas, core and periphery, and between EU member states and EU candidate countries.

Although the Strategy does not allocate funding resources directly, it plays a key role in directing political attention toward regional imbalances, influencing political priorities, and helping to shape a more place-sensitive policy landscape at both EU and national or regional levels. Through strategic dialogue and thematic cooperation, the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will strengthen the Strategy’s contribution to a fairer, more cohesive Danube Region. By spotlighting regional gaps and territorial fragmentation, the Presidency aims to encourage more tailored, inclusive, and forward-looking approaches – particularly in the fields of infrastructure, skills development, public services, and competitiveness.

- **Acknowledging the role of cities as drivers in reducing disparities:** The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency recognises the key role of cities – particularly small and medium-sized ones – in reducing disparities and promoting innovation, economic vitality, and social inclusion across the Danube Region. Urban areas serve as hubs that connect people, services, and opportunities, making them critical levers for achieving more balanced and sustainable territorial development.

Cities contribute actively to transnational cooperation, especially under EU funding programmes such as the Interreg Danube Region Programme. The Presidency will advocate for stronger alignment between EUSDR priorities and urban policies, supporting project-based collaboration, improved access to funding, and knowledge exchange and capacity building.

Urban areas, including those with rural characteristics, can act as integrated development hubs, especially in less developed regions. The EUSDR Presidency will emphasise the strategic importance of empowering cities as partners in achieving the EUSDR's overall objectives of cohesion, sustainability and innovation.

- **Advancing social cohesion, skills, and cultural connectivity:** Deepening people-to-people connections and cultural exchange is a fundamental dimension of the EUSDR, contributing to mutual understanding, social cohesion, and a shared European identity. In this context, sustainable and innovative tourism plays a complementary role by enabling intercultural interaction, supporting local economies, and promoting balanced territorial development.

Strengthening professional education and vocational training remains essential for developing human capital and addressing labour market needs, thereby enhancing the Region's long-term competitiveness and helping reduce regional disparities. These efforts are integral to the broader goal of fostering cohesion and deepening territorial integration across the Danube Region. The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will support actions that promote academic and research cooperation, civil society participation, intercultural dialogue, and sustainable tourism development.

Platforms such as the Danube Youth Council (DYC) and the Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON) are well positioned to contribute to these efforts by ensuring that youth perspectives are meaningfully integrated into regional cooperation and can provide strong advocacy towards policy-making processes. The Presidency will continue to support the continuation of the DYC and the ongoing implementation of the DYON.

Thematic Priorities

Reducing regional disparities is essential to achieving a more cohesive, competitive, and resilient Danube Region. The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency's thematic priorities are designed to operationalise this vision by addressing structural inequalities and promoting integration across all layers – economic, territorial, social, and institutional.

1. Connectivity for Growth and Competitiveness

Connectivity remains a core pillar for the Danube Region's competitiveness and economic development. The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will advocate for reinforcing the Danube Region's economic competitiveness through modern, green, and secure physical and digital connectivity to foster resilient and sustainable economic links across the Region.

A well-connected region is a cohesive region. Disparities in transport access - between urban centres and peripheral areas, or between EU Member States and candidate countries – can be a persistent driver of inequality in the Danube Region. The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency places transport connectivity at the heart of its vision to reduce territorial and economic disparities by unlocking the full potential of the Danube River as a unifying and sustainable transport artery in Europe. The Danube River is more than a waterway – it is the spine of the Danube Region, connecting countries and regions, cultures, and economies from the Black Forest to the Black Sea. From geopolitical point of view, a well-connected Danube Region further strengthens Europe's resilience, security, and stability. Yet, the Danube River's full potential as a sustainable, multimodal, and inclusive transport corridor remains partly unrealised due to persistent navigability constraints, underinvestment in infrastructure, and fragmented governance.

Under the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency, the Danube River will be championed as a unifying force for reducing regional disparities and driving long-term resilience and prosperity.

In 2026, Bulgaria will mark two symbolic milestones that underscore its long-standing commitment to multimodal Danube transport and cooperation:

70 years of the Executive Agency for Exploration and Maintenance of the Danube River – This anniversary honours Bulgaria’s institutional capacity and leadership in ensuring safe, navigable, and sustainable use of the Danube. It also reinforces the importance of reliable waterway infrastructure for economic equity across the Region. The anniversary is planned to be marked with an international conference scheduled to take place on 1 April 2026 in Ruse.

160 anniversary of the Port of Ruse - As one of the oldest and most strategic ports on the Danube River, Ruse has been a gateway between East and West for generations. Celebrating its history provides an opportunity to highlight inland ports as drivers of development, especially in regions that lag behind in connectivity, multimodality and logistics competitiveness.

2. Embedding the EUSDR into Future EU Funding Instruments: Cohesion Policy and EU MRS Beyond 2027

The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will promote stronger integration of EUSDR objectives into the post-2027 EU funding architecture. It will advocate for better alignment between EUSDR priorities and the programming of EU Cohesion Policy and Common Agricultural Policy funds, by fostering dialogue between national and regional authorities, EU institutions, managing authorities, and macro-regional stakeholders. The EUSDR, with committed support of the European Commission (DG REGIO) and the relevant

stakeholders shall continue to promote the improvement of the alignment and mainstreaming of macro-regional priorities into EU, national and regional operational programmes, as well as encourage the development of cross-border, transnational, and macro-regional projects, processes, and initiatives, with visible impact and clear added value for the Region. A particular focus shall be placed on the future role of the EU Cohesion Policy as the main framework to support balanced territorial development and macro-regional cooperation.

The importance of acknowledging the strategic role and added value of EU macro-regional strategies such as the EUSDR at EU-level programming and the upcoming budgetary discussions shall be underlined. The role of macro-regional cooperation in contributing to cohesion, competitiveness, green and digital transitions, and social inclusion shall be promoted.

The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will also support actions to scale up the broader use of integrated territorial development tools, including Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), in the context of the discussions on the next generation of Interreg programmes beyond 2027. Building on Bulgaria's cross-border cooperation experience, these instruments have demonstrated strong potential in engaging local actors, addressing disparities, and delivering tailored, place-based solutions that can also bring added value to the Danube Region.

3. Supporting the European Perspective of EU candidate countries from the Danube Region

Strengthening cooperation with EU candidate countries from the Danube Region remains a fundamental mission of the Strategy. The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will encourage initiatives that support the merit-based EU candidate perspectives of EU candidate countries, promote democratic governance and the implementation of EU candidate-related

reforms (acquis), especially on the fundamentals, enhance capacity building and facilitate regional integration. Cultural diplomacy and youth exchange programmes can be used as instruments to deepen mutual understanding and integration.

4. Counteracting Depopulation and Strengthening Demographic Resilience

Depopulation demographic changes remain critical challenges for the Danube Region, particularly in rural, mountainous, and peripheral areas, where it threatens social cohesion, economic viability, and long-term territorial development. Demographic resilience is a strategic pillar of cohesion and competitiveness. Responding effectively requires politically coordinated, place-based approaches that deliver tangible results on the ground.

Integrated territorial instruments, notably Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), represent key tools for advancing territorial cohesion and mitigating the effects of depopulation. When coupled with strong local administrative capacity, effective multilevel governance, and accessible, flexible funding frameworks, these instruments can drive targeted, cross-sectoral interventions tailored to local needs. The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will support structured dialogue among stakeholders to identify lessons learned and strengthen their strategic application in addressing demographic decline.

5. Advancing the Danube–Black Sea Link as a Driver of Regional Integration

The Danube–Black Sea axis is emerging as a strategic corridor for connectivity, economic cooperation, and sustainable development. The EUSDR and its platforms can foster coordination and stakeholder dialogue to strengthen this link.

By promoting synergies in transport, sustainable infrastructure, and areas such as the blue and circular economy, the Strategy can contribute to greater regional cohesion, resilience and integration. Looking ahead, the EUSDR can participate in strengthening the

cooperation and synergies with regional frameworks and initiatives, including the European Union's strategic approach to the Black Sea region, in support of common strategic goals.

6. EUSDR Governance

The Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will support and facilitate the ongoing process on improving the EUSDR governance. This includes clarifying the roles and responsibilities and the interlinkages between EUSDR core stakeholders, thereby enhancing the Strategy's operational effectiveness. In line with the conclusions of the 2025 EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation Report, the Presidency will encourage dialogue on the EUSDR governance architecture, improving coordination mechanisms, and fostering more active engagement, especially on thematic levels and in Steering Groups.

Conclusion

With the 2026 political and thematic agenda, Bulgaria seeks to strengthen the role of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region as a platform for inclusive cooperation, policy coordination, and strategic alignment. By placing the reduction of regional disparities, enhanced connectivity, and deeper cohesion at the heart of its Presidency, Bulgaria aims to advance both national and European priorities and contributing to a more resilient, integrated, and competitive Danube Region.

A key milestone of the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will be the 15th EUSDR Annual Forum, which will provide a high-level platform for political dialogue, stakeholder engagement, and strategic reflection. The Forum will be thematically aligned with the Presidency's main priority – Reducing Disparities and Strengthening Cohesion in the Danube Region – and will provide an

opportunity to highlight achievements, share good practices, and mobilise support for stronger macro-regional cooperation, involving the EUSDR community and beyond.

In the framework of the 15th EUSDR Annual Forum, the Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency will host a Meeting of Ministers responsible for Regional Development of the Danube Region, culminating in the adoption of a Ministerial Declaration. This Declaration will reaffirm the shared political commitment of EUSDR participating countries to tackling regional disparities and strengthening territorial cohesion as key drivers of stability, competitiveness, and long-term prosperity in the Danube Region.