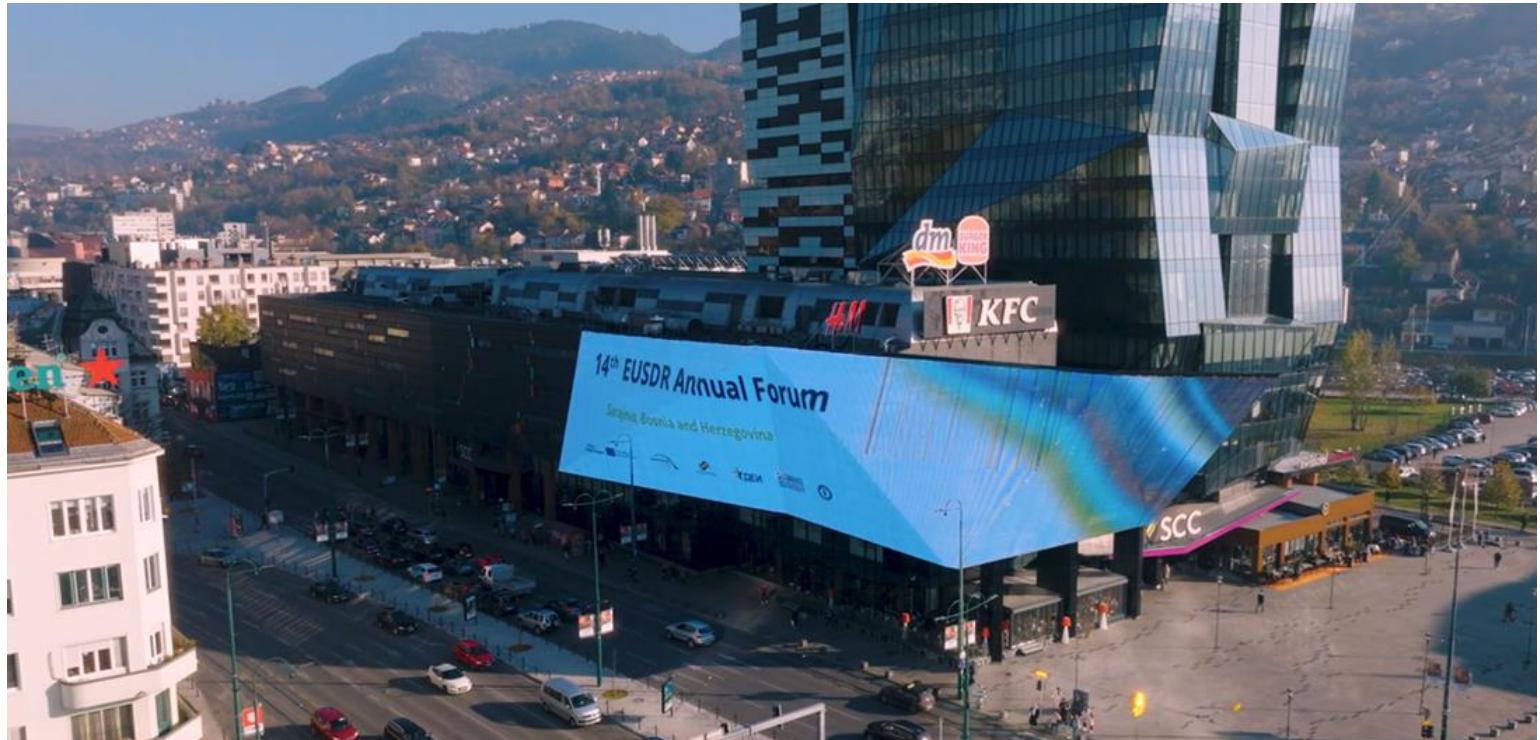


# THE 14<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL FORUM OF THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION (EUSDR)

*Flowing Together, Growing Together*

4-6 November 2025, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina  
Venue: Congress Centre of the Hotel Holiday, Zmaja od Bosne 4, 71000, Sarajevo

## Report



## INTRODUCTION

The **14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum**, organised by the Directorate for European Integration and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with support from the European Commission, the Danube Strategy Point and the Interreg Danube Region Programme, was held in Sarajevo on 5-6 November 2025. Further information: <https://danube-region.eu/events/14th-eusdr-annual-forum/>.

Under the title: ***Flowing together, growing together***”, the Annual Forum represented the central event of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s one-year Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, bringing together representatives of the fourteen participating countries, the European Commission, regional initiatives, civil society, and the academic community.

As an interactive platform, the Forum provided space for the exchange of knowledge, experiences, ideas, and initiatives on the following topics:

- EU enlargement and support to candidate countries
- Tackling brain drain, closing skills gaps, and reducing youth unemployment
- Education, training, and demographic change
- Green and digital transition in the Danube Region
- Cooperation within the Interreg Danube Region Programme (DRP) for a more resilient, sustainable, and connected Danube Region

The Annual Forum hosted 564 onsite and 193 online participants.



Source: <https://danube-region.eu/>

**TUESDAY, 4 NOVEMBER 2025**

## **12<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day: Local Voices, European Future – The Crucial Role of Communities in Shaping EU Policy and Driving Enlargement**

The 12<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day was held on 4 November 2025, gathering approximately 90 participants from across the Danube Region. Under the theme “Local Voices, European Future – The Crucial Role of Communities in Shaping EU Policy and Driving Enlargement”, the event highlighted the importance of local actors, municipalities, and community organisations in supporting democratic development, good governance, and the EU accession process.

The programme featured engaging panel discussions, interactive World Café sessions focused on practical exchange and co-creation, the Danube Participation Agora showcasing grassroots initiatives, as well as multiple networking opportunities. The event enabled meaningful dialogue between civil society, local authorities, and regional stakeholders, reinforcing the importance of inclusive participation in shaping the future of the EU enlargement agenda.



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Adla Dizdar Hodžić, Mojca Krisper Figueroa, Aida Daguda, Johan Magnusson engaging in panel discussion



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Welcome address by Midhat Džemić, Directorate for European Integration, EUSDR Presidency of Bosnia & Herzegovina



World Café / Agora

## **Welcoming Reception for All Participants**

On the evening before the official start of the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, all participants were invited by the Directorate for European Integration Bosnia and Herzegovina to join the Welcome Reception at the venue site of Hotel Holiday.



*©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency  
Welcome Reception*

## DAY 1

WEDNESDAY, 5 NOVEMBER 2025

### Ministerial Meeting: Meeting of the Danube Region Foreign Ministers

The first day of the Annual Forum was marked by the **Meeting of Foreign Ministers** of the EUSDR participating states, at which the [Sarajevo Danube Declaration](#), a joint statement of the Foreign Ministers, was adopted.

The Ministers underlined that in 2025 the Danube Region stands at a critical geopolitical crossroads. While recognising progress in European integration and economic resilience, they noted that the Region continues to face significant challenges, including security risks, demographic pressures, and persistent development disparities. In this context, they emphasised that strengthening unity, accelerating the enlargement process and reinforcing regional cohesion remain essential priorities.



Building on the Vienna Danube Declaration 2024, the Ministers reaffirmed their shared determination to further develop the Danube Region as an area of cooperation, stability and common values. The EUSDR was acknowledged as a pivotal framework bringing together EU Member States and candidate countries to jointly address challenges and advance common objectives.



The Ministers highlighted the importance of multilateralism, dialogue and trust-building as the foundations of lasting security. They condemned the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine, expressed full solidarity with Ukraine, and reaffirmed their support for its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. They denounced the missile and drone attacks targeting Ukraine's Danube infrastructure and reiterated their support for the sovereignty and stability of the Republic of Moldova. They also recognised the Danube River as a vital logistical corridor and confirmed their commitment to safeguarding freedom of navigation. Furthermore, they welcomed the agreement on the first phase of the Comprehensive Plan to end the Gaza conflict and reiterated their support for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on the two-state solution.

The acceleration of the EU integration process was reaffirmed as a strategic priority and a key driver of peace, prosperity, reforms and reconciliation across the Region. The Ministers stressed the need for a merit-based, credible and predictable enlargement process, taking into account the individual progress of each partner

country. In this regard, the Danube Region was recognised as a model for macro-regional cooperation bridging the EU and candidate countries, with the EUSDR serving as an effective tool for gradual integration.

The discussion further highlighted the urgency of strengthened cooperation in civil protection, border management, migration governance and climate resilience. The Ministers underlined the importance of sustained investment in education, youth and innovation as foundations for long-term development. They commended the ongoing work of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) and the Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON) for their contributions to participatory democracy and the strengthening of a shared regional identity.

The Ministers also reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable tourism, biodiversity protection, the circular economy and the objectives of the European Green Deal.

In conclusion, they underscored that strengthening energy interconnectivity, digitalisation and transport infrastructure remains vital to enhancing competitiveness and ensuring sustainable development throughout the Danube Region.



*Family photo of the Foreign Ministers of the Danube Region  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency*

## **EUSDR PA 2 event (plus results SECW 2025): Affordable, secure and sustainable energy for the Danube Region**

Within the framework of EUSDR Priority Area 2 and with contributions from the SECW 2025, a dedicated session addressed the theme of affordable, secure and sustainable energy in the Danube Region. The discussion reflected the EU's objective of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and considered the implications for regional energy systems. Members of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) also attended the session, with Irina Apostol, a DYC member from Moldova, contributing to the panel discussion.

The session noted the Region's ongoing dependence on fossil fuels and ageing infrastructure, pointing to energy efficiency, diversification of supply, and greater use of local renewable resources as important areas for action. Particular attention was given to heating, cooling and industrial processes, where efficiency improvements were seen as relevant both for emissions reduction and for mitigating energy security and price risks. In the opening remarks, Annamária Nádor (PAC 2) outlined key energy-related challenges in the Danube Region and underlined the value of coordinated approaches at regional level.

Márton Sipos (KPMG Hungary) presented possible pathways for the gradual phase-out of gas and options for diversification, highlighting the need to balance security of supply with decarbonisation objectives. Léon Kamenický (GATUM) addressed structural barriers to energy efficiency, especially in buildings and industry, and referred to the role of targeted investment and policy support. Sanja Kapetina (MOFTER) discussed aspects of energy sovereignty, with a focus on local renewable production and decentralised systems as elements of regional resilience.

Overall, the discussion indicated broad agreement on the importance of integrated policies, cross-border cooperation and sustained investment to support the energy transition in the Danube Region. The exchange confirmed that measures combining efficiency improvements, renewable deployment and diversification remain central to the work of Priority Area 2 in contributing to a secure, affordable and sustainable regional energy system.



*Márton Sipos, KPMG Hungary  
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## **EUSDR PA 11 Event: Impacts for the Danube Region of the war in Ukraine in regards of security**

On Wednesday, 5 November 2025, the representatives of PA 11 hosted a session at the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under the title “Impact of the War in Ukraine with Regard to Security,” an insightful presentation was delivered. With invaluable support from Mr. Rabini of the Munich Police and Mr. Kemp and Mr. Lee of the Global Initiative Against Transnational and Organised Crime, the audience explored the current measures and workshops aimed at strengthening networks and collaboration in the fight against crime in the Danube Region. Also, the blind spots and potential areas of criminal activity that may persist along the Danube itself were examined.



## **Opening of the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum**

The 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum was officially opened by the Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency on 5 November 2025, marking the first day of the official Annual Forum programme.

Opening remarks were delivered by Mr. Elmedin Konaković, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ms. Elvira Habota, Director of the Directorate for European Integration and H.E. Mr. Luigi Soreca, Head of the EU Delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under the theme “**Flowing together, growing together**”, the vibrant programme of the Forum focused on shaping the future of the Danube Region, with sessions on sustainability, environmental protection, digital development, and governance innovation. The atmosphere throughout the days was marked by openness, curiosity, and the willingness to share knowledge.

The opening ceremony of the Annual Forum was enriched with an appropriate cultural and entertainment programme, during which the representatives of the Sarajevo Philharmonic String Quartet performed the musical pieces, The Blue Danube and Ode to Joy.



*Director of the Directorate for European Integration, Elvira Habota  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency*



*EU Ambassador to BiH, H.E. Luigi Soreca  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency*



*Minister of Foreign Affairs, Elvedin Konaković  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency*



*Sarajevo Philharmonic String Quartet performing the Blue Danube and Ode to Joy*  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency

## Handing-Over Ceremony

The handing-over of the EUSDR Presidency took place during the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum . Elmedin Konaković, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, wished success to Mr. Ivan Ivanov, Minister of Regional Development and Public Works of Bulgaria.,



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## Press Conference

The handing-over ceremony was followed by a press conference. Foreign Minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Elmedin Konaković, Director of the Directorate for European Integration, Elvira Habota, Minister of Regional Development and Public Works of Bulgaria, Mr. Ivan Ivanov, and EU Ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Luigi Soreca, answered questions from international and local journalists.



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## Danube Region Programme (DRP) Annual Event: From Vision to Cohesion: Funding Pathways for EU Integration in the Region

**Speakers and moderators:** Moray Gilland, Head of Macro-regions, Transnational/Interregional/External Cooperation, Enlargement, Unit D1, DG Regio (online); Imre Csalagovits, Head of Managing Authority, Interreg Danube Region Programme; Ms Birgit Vogel, ICPDR Executive Secretary; Mr Gheorghe Constantin, EUSDR PA 5 Priority Area Coordinator (Deputy General Director, General Directorate for Waters - Ministry of Environment, Water and Forests of Romania); Dr. Zsolt Kozma, Associate Professor, Budapest University of Technology and Economics – representing Danube Water Balance project; Stephen Halligan, Priority officer, Interreg Danube Region Programme; Professor Adnan Efendic, University of Sarajevo; Mr. Jörg Mirtl, Federal Ministry for Labour, Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection, European Strategy for the Danube Region; Professor Martin Zagar, Rochester Institute of Technology, Croatia; Simona Ene, Head of Joint Secretariat, Interreg Danube Region Programme; Gusztav Csomor, Priority Officer, Interreg Danube Region Programme.

The Interreg Danube Region Programme (DRP) annual event marked 35 years of transnational cooperation in the Danube Region, bringing together the European Commission, programme authorities, national representatives, experts and academia.

The discussions framed cooperation as a long-term investment underpinning cohesion, enlargement, resilience and competitiveness across a macro-region of 14 countries and over 110 million inhabitants.

The European Commission reaffirmed Interreg's role as a cornerstone of cohesion policy and presented the post-2027 outlook. Interreg is set to remain a distinct pillar under the next Multiannual Financial Framework, with a record allocation of over EUR 10 billion and a stronger performance-based approach. Greater flexibility, new Interreg-specific objectives and an emphasis on resilient border regions were highlighted as key evolutions.

Programme authorities retraced the DRP's development from limited cooperation in the 1990s to today's integrated framework. Over time, accession countries have aligned with EU rules and built strong administrative capacity, creating a shared technical and governance space. Cooperation is now seen as a two-way learning process and a strategic tool for supporting enlargement and territorial integration, particularly as EU borders and partnerships evolve with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.



*Imre Csalagovits: Integration of the Danube Region: past, present and future*  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency

Geopolitical shifts were acknowledged, with attention turning to new functional cooperation zones along the EU-Ukraine-Republic of Moldova border, the Lower Danube and the Black Sea. The DRP's bridging role between EU Member States and candidate countries was reaffirmed.

Two major thematic challenges dominated the programme:

**Water scarcity** and drought were presented as structural, basin-wide impacts of climate change, affecting multiple economic sectors. Experts stressed fragmentation in drought management and the need for harmonised monitoring, basin-wide water balance tools and stronger transboundary coordination. The ICPDR framework, EU water directives and the forthcoming European Water Resilience Strategy were identified as key policy anchors, with confidence that increased Interreg funding would support larger joint water projects. The Danube Water Balance project illustrated the added value of transnational solutions.

**Demographic change** and competitiveness focused on population decline, labour shortages and under-used human capital. Discussions highlighted “labour market slack” among women, older workers, persons with disabilities, marginalised groups and rural populations. Projects under the DRP already address skills, inclusion and rural retention, with emphasis on aligning employment services, territorial strategies and investment, particularly in candidate countries.

In closing, programme authorities outlined concrete funding opportunities, noting that around EUR 27.3 million remains available under the third call for proposals. Priority areas include innovation and skills (notably AI in public administration), environmental and energy transition topics, selected social and labour market issues, and governance, while cultural funding is fully allocated.

Overall, the event portrayed a macro-region at a turning point: equipped with strong cooperative structures but facing intensifying climate, demographic and geopolitical pressures. Participants were invited to translate shared analysis into targeted projects and policies, keeping the Interreg Danube Region Programme central to European integration and sustainable development in the Danube Region.

## **EUSDR PA 10 Event: Masterclass- How local participation reinforces EU enlargement**

*Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity & Cooperation” Session*

### **Masterclass “Enlargement in Action: Civil Society and Municipalities Shaping the Future”**

**Moderators:** Claudia Singer-Smith & Andreea Prasacu, EUSDR Priority Area 10

**Speakers:** Johann Magnusson, European Commission (DG REGIO), Aida Daguda, Centre for Civil Society Promotion, Thomas Prorok, Centre of Public Administration Research (KDZ).

The session underscored the significance of engaging local authorities such as municipalities and cities, as well as civil society organisations in the EU enlargement process, moving beyond the traditional focus on national governments. Municipalities were recognised as pivotal players, implementing a high percentage of EU regulations, thereby necessitating their active involvement in accession strategies. Civil society was highlighted as a cornerstone for democratisation, transparency, and advocacy, serving as both watchdogs and facilitators of dialogue. These perspectives were rooted in twelve key theses developed during the 12<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day, held on 4 November 2025, in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Furthermore, cohesion policy and instruments such as Interreg, URBACT, and community-led local development were presented as vital mechanisms to foster local participation and prepare candidate countries for EU membership. The discussion stressed the need to translate EU values into tangible actions, simplify communication without compromising accuracy, bridge information gaps, and create physical spaces for dialogue. Strengthening the partnership principle, enhancing coordination among civil society organisations, and investing in trust, capacity building, and youth engagement were identified as essential measures.



*Claudia Singer-Smith, PAC 10, Welcome & Introduction. Driving Enlargement – Local Voices for a European Future  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency*

Bence Bíró presented the Danube Youth Position Paper, outlining young people's views in the Danube Region on pressing issues such as barriers to youth participation, volunteering, and the financing challenges faced by youth organisations. This was followed by an interactive discussion facilitated by Caroline Lercher Tauber. Participants, including members of the Danube Youth Council, engaged actively and shared their perspectives on the importance of youth involvement.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations:**

Municipalities could increasingly move beyond their traditional role as administrative implementers and take on a more strategic position in EU policies, with greater involvement in decision-making processes. Civil society organisations should be empowered through structured participation mechanisms, legal clarity, access to funding, and capacity development. Constructive criticism and cross-border coalition-building were also emphasised as critical competencies in these processes.

Capacity building and integration literacy emerged as priorities, with calls for training programmes to enhance understanding of EU processes, funding structures, and policy frameworks. Furthermore, the emotional and cultural dimensions of EU accession were acknowledged as vital for fostering trust and genuine cooperation.

### **Possible Follow-Up Actions and Contributions to EUSDR Objectives:**

To advance EUSDR objectives, the session recommended strengthening multi-level governance by promoting collaboration between national and local authorities during accession. Regional platforms and cross-border networks should be developed to encourage intercultural approaches. Facilitating access to EU programmes

including Interreg, URBACT, Horizon, and Erasmus were deemed essential for preparing stakeholders for future cohesion policy frameworks. Additionally, investing in youth engagement and grassroots participation was highlighted as means to cultivate a culture of inclusivity and shared responsibility.

Finally, trust was repeatedly cited as the cornerstone of successful cooperation among stakeholders, including local authorities, civil society organisations, national governments, and EU institutions. Clear and accessible communication remains a challenge but is indispensable for broadening engagement and ensuring meaningful participation.

### **EUSDR PA 8: Workshop on Lighthouse Initiatives from the Danube Region: Supply Chains & Finance** (as part of the EUSDR PA 8 Study “Identification of Lighthouse Projects in the Danube Region”)

Steinbeis Europa Zentrum, in cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia and the Pannon Business Network (Hungary), commissioned by EUSDR Priority Area 8 – Competitiveness of Enterprises and the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg, conducted a study on lighthouse initiatives/projects/best practices from across the Danube Region.

The study identifies 30 lighthouse initiatives, best practices and projects in three key sectors:

1. Green tech, circular economy & bioeconomy
2. Digitalisation, AI, metaverse & virtual worlds
3. Supply chains & finance

The fully study can be downloaded [here](#).

Highlights from the fields of Supply Chains and Finance were presented during the “Lighthouses in the Danube Region” workshop at the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Sarajevo, featuring the three different key speakers mentioned below. The event was moderated by Robin Schenk of Steinbeis Europa Zentrum, and a short welcoming speech was given by Ms. Carmen Hawkins, Coordinator of EUSDR PA 8.



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In closing the event, Ms. Hawkins also handed out certificates marking the awards as “Danube Lighthouses” to the lighthouse initiative representatives present at the Annual Forum.

- **RETHINK-GSC – presented by Dr. Birgit Meyer (WIFO, Austria)**

The RETHINK-GSC project actively collaborates with enterprises to uncover their potential for more resilient, efficient and sustainable supply chain management. In her presentation, Dr. Meyer focused on the results of a survey that was conducted within the frame of the project, giving important insights into the needs, current activities and future plans of companies when it comes to transforming supply chain networks. More results on the consortium’s work are available on the project’s [website](#).

- **global verantwortlich BW – presented by Jannik Struss (UPJ e.V., Baden-Württemberg)**

This [initiative](#) empowers primarily SMEs in Baden-Württemberg to take greater responsibility in global supply chains. It provides practical guidance and tools for companies to manage supply chains ethically, transparently, and with a focus on sustainability and human rights. In his presentation, Jannik Struss pointed out in what way different topics are prioritised in several networking and information events, and which concrete support offers the initiative can provide for SMEs in Baden-Württemberg.

- **Supply Chain Intelligence Institute Austria (ASCII) – presented by Dr. Klaus Friesenbichler (Austria)**

The Supply Chain Intelligence Institute Austria (ASCII), established with support from the Austrian national government, represents a pioneering approach to improving supply chain competitiveness.

It offers expertise, data-driven insights, and strategic support to help companies strengthen their supply chain intelligence and preparedness. As an example, Dr. Friesenbichler presented the [Austrian Supply Chain Pressure Index](#), which is regularly updated by ASCII and shows the level of current pressure on the Austrian economy regarding overall reliability of supply chains based on a number of factors.

The following short panel discussion focused on issues like the new EU omnibus regulation initiative, where speakers noted scepticism regarding the way the issue is currently being tackled. Moreover, speakers were asked whether they had any additional policymaking wishes – the reaction was clear in the way that public support for SMEs is needed on all policy levels. Mechanisms that give guidance on how to transform and invest in new supply chains are needed in order to increase competitiveness.

Therefore, one key finding was that the replication and upscaling of analysing and supporting initiatives like these lighthouse projects would be beneficial in many more parts of the Danube Region, where the level of pressure on pre-existing supply chains has increased drastically for many SMEs over the last few years and will continue to do so in times of geopolitical uncertainty.

For more insights and general recommendations with relevance for the EUSDR and future strategy development, it is recommended to check especially the chapters on policy recommendations and future trends in the [study document](#), within the framework of which this session took place.

## Social event and dinner

The first day of the Annual Forum concluded in style with a joint dinner and entertainment programme hosted at Dom Mladih (Youth Centre Skenderija), one of Sarajevo's most iconic modernist landmarks and a vibrant symbol of the city's cultural heartbeat. Famous for launching the careers of numerous pop and rock bands and performers who later gained regional and international acclaim, Dom Mladih offered an inspiring setting for the evening's festivities.

Participants enjoyed a lively and welcoming atmosphere, complete with an entertaining quiz and an exceptional gastronomic selection. The event created an ideal space for informal networking, fostering new connections and strengthening collaboration among representatives from participating countries.



*Networking and quiz*  
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## DAY 2

### THURSDAY, 6 NOVEMBER 2025

#### **Joint Meeting of EUSDR and EUSAIR National Coordinators on Enhancing EU Accession Support for Candidate Countries in EUSDR and EUSAIR**

On the second day of the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, held under the Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency, a historic milestone was achieved. For the first time, and upon the invitation of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency, the four Presidencies of the EU macro-regional strategies (EUSDR, EUSAIR, EUSALP, and EUSBSR) met within the framework of the EUSDR Annual Forum.

The Director of the Directorate for European Integration of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with representatives of the Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency and the North Macedonian EUSAIR Presidency, welcomed participants and underlined the importance of the meeting for fostering meaningful dialogue and cooperation. Two external experts supported the EUSDR and EUSAIR Presidencies in facilitating the discussions.

The objective of the Joint National Coordinators' (NC) Meeting on Support for Candidate Countries in EUSDR and EUSAIR was to facilitate and promote collaborative dialogue among EU Member States and candidate countries within the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) and the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR). The meeting aimed to identify actionable plans to support candidate countries in their EU accession processes and to establish a structured platform for meaningful dialogue and cooperation, thereby strengthening accession efforts within the EUSDR and EUSAIR.

The Joint EUSDR-EUSAIR National Coordinators' Meeting, entitled Enhancing EU Accession Support for Candidate Countries in EUSDR and EUSAIR, marked an important step towards strengthening regional cooperation, advancing EU integration, and fostering mutual learning across Europe.

**Midhat Džemić**, representing the Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency, highlighted the role of macro-regional strategies as vital policy networks for EU enlargement, emphasising their capacity to support the enlargement process through concrete and tangible initiatives at the regional level.

**Elvira Habota**, Director of the Directorate for European Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, underlined that Bosnia and Herzegovina places great importance on regional cooperation and on the implementation of both the EUSDR and EUSAIR, which serve as essential frameworks for fostering integration, stability, and sustainable development across the Region.

**Zuica Zmejkovska**, representing the North Macedonian EUSAIR Presidency, stressed that the timing is right to initiate a specific joint action leading to tangible outcomes from which the entire Region can benefit, noting that the meeting aimed to lay the foundations for future cooperation.

## The expected outcomes of the meeting included:

- An agreement on the timeline of concrete follow-up steps, including defining specific areas of activities, concrete steps and the roles/tasks of EUSAIR and EUSDR governance bodies;
- An agreement on the mechanisms of strengthened collaboration among National Coordinators' bodies of EUSDR and EUSAIR, enabling a supportive network for future interactions.



*EUSDR and EUSAIR NCs Family Photo  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency*

## Digitalisation, boost for competitiveness, sustainability and growth (EUSDR PA 8, IDDEEA)

**Moderator:** Balázs Barta, CEO of Pannon Business Network

**Speakers:** Almir Badnjević, director of IDDEA, Dr. Claus Hoffmann, CEO, Center for Digitisation Böblingen District, Robert Sever, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia, Tomislav Vazdar, Croatian CroAI association, Igor Žula, Slovenian Logistics Association.

The event explored the transformative power of digitalisation in the private sector, with a special focus on SMEs in the Danube Region. It highlighted investment opportunities in cutting-edge technologies such as AI, IoT, robotics, and e-commerce systems, while also addressing the potential side effects of digital transformation. Additionally, the event emphasised the crucial role of digital infrastructure development within the public sector, recognising it as a key enabler for businesses to fully leverage the benefits of digitalisation.

## Main Topics and Key Messages:

*E-signature and Digital Wallet: Enhancing security & accessibility; Public digital services for businesses; Sustainable digital transformation of business and Artificial Intelligence in business.*

The event focused on **digital transformation in the private sector of the Danube Region**, with a strong emphasis on **SMEs**. The participants highlighted opportunities in **AI, IoT, robotics, e-commerce**, and the importance of **public digital infrastructure** as a key enabler of business digitalisation.

Main challenges for businesses include **high investment costs**, complex **EU regulatory requirements**, **skills shortages**, uneven **digital infrastructure** across regions, and **high energy prices with decarbonisation pressure**.



*Director of IDDEA, Almir Badnjević, introducing E-signature and Digital Wallet  
©Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency*

## **EUSDR PA 8 - Workshop on Lighthouse Initiatives from the Danube Region: Green Tech, Circular Economy and Circular Bioeconomy (as part of the EUSDR PA 8 Study “Identification of Lighthouse Projects in The Danube Region”)**

The Lighthouse Workshop, organised under EUSDR Priority Area 8 (Competitiveness of Enterprises), took place on 6 November 2025 during the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Sarajevo. The session introduced key findings of the EUSDR PA 8 Lighthouse Study, showcased selected examples of innovative green and circular initiatives from the Danube Region, and concluded with an official acknowledgement of lighthouse actors.

The workshop was opened by Grit Ackermann (Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia), who welcomed participants, presented the objectives of the session, and introduced the PA 8 representatives Carmen Hawkins and Karmen Maričić. Carmen Hawkins delivered welcome remarks, underlining the

importance of strengthening competitiveness through innovation, especially in fields such as circular bioeconomy, green technologies and industrial symbiosis.

Following the opening, Robin Schenk (Steinbeis Europa Zentrum) presented the results of the EUSDR PA 8 Lighthouse Study, outlining the selection methodology, criteria for replicability and scalability, and the role of innovation ecosystems in supporting the transition towards a sustainable macro-regional economy. The study demonstrated that regional intermediaries such as chambers, innovation agencies, clusters and bioeconomy platforms play a decisive role in translating policies into tangible services for SMEs, and that visibility and continuity are key for scaling impact across borders.

The presentation was followed by three lighthouse showcases representing diverse forms of circular and bio-based innovation. Pauline Leiman (Umwelttechnik BW, Germany) presented the Innovation Hub CCUBIO BW, highlighting advancements in industrial carbon capture and circular CO<sub>2</sub> utilisation supported by regulatory guidance and cross-sector collaboration. Mathieu Morival (Neo-Eco, France) introduced the Neo-Eco Ukraine projects, demonstrating how circular business models and industrial symbiosis approaches support reconstruction in Ukraine and help transform waste into marketable materials. The third contribution, presented by Roman Bahnaru (E-Circular, Moldova), focused on the RECONOMY Program, a regional mechanism that stimulates market-driven circular services, skills development and job creation in the Republic of Moldova.

At the beginning of the workshop, the planned panel session was adjusted to allow for a brief exchange with participants. Audience questions focused on challenges related to regulatory barriers, the need for skills development to accelerate the uptake of green and circular technologies, and the importance of cross-border cooperation in scaling solutions.

As a conclusion, PA 8 Coordinator Carmen Hawkins awarded official Lighthouse Certificates to the organisations represented at the workshop. The acknowledgement aims to support visibility, networking and future cooperation opportunities among exemplary initiatives featured in the Lighthouse Study.

Certificates were presented to: **Innovation Hub CCUBIO BW**, **Neo-Eco Ukraine**, **RECONOMY Program**, **GreenTech BW Platform**, **CEE2ACT**, **CCRI Podravje Pilot Region**, **Green Up Hub**, **ToBeReal**, **Bioeconomy Cluster** and the **Slovenian Center for Circular Economy**.



The workshop demonstrated strong interest in continuing lighthouse identification as a permanent mechanism under PA 8 and confirmed the value of sharing concrete examples that can be replicated across the Danube Region. Through enhanced visibility, policy learning and cooperation among innovation actors, the Danube Region can further strengthen its role as a testbed for circular, green and bio-based industrial transformation in Europe.

## **EUSDR PA 4, 5, 6 Event: Increasing Water Security: A key to achievement of SDG**

The side event addressed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a specific focus on Goal 6: *Clean Water and Sanitation*. Its purpose was to demonstrate the central role of water as a unifying element across all SDGs and to underline, within the EUSDR framework, the importance of effective water and nature management as a foundation for sustainable development at regional and national levels.

### **Key messages:**

- Water touches every aspect of society and the environment; it is essential for producing our food and energy, and for human health.
- Water security might mean different things depending on the circumstances. An individual perceives the water security in terms that the water runs from the household tap whenever needed. The farmer is seeking to receive enough water in times of droughts. The industrial facilities need water as a production input. Municipalities are faced to significant costs in times of floods.
- Due to climate change, water availability is becoming less predictable. Most water resources managers are concerned that climate change impacts will jeopardise their ability to provide enough water in an appropriate quality at the right time to all, including the environment.
- Without better infrastructure and management, people and economies will suffer and there will be further losses in biodiversity and ecosystem resilience.
- Healthy aquatic and riparian ecosystems are the foundation of both water security and biodiversity.
- Protecting and restoring wetlands, rivers, and floodplains enhances natural water storage, improves resilience to floods and droughts, and supports rich biodiversity.
- Nature-based solutions that integrate biodiversity conservation - such as wetland and floodplain restoration - are cost-effective ways to strengthen water security and climate resilience.

Presentations provided examples and good practices in protection of water quality, measures to adapt to climate change (such as flood forecasting and drought impact mitigation) and enhancing the role of water-dependent ecosystems. The interactive sli.do session involved the audience to discuss the issues of safe drinking water and sanitation for all. The discussion focused on change mindset to understand the need to adapt to climate change in all sectors - including urban planning, industrial and agriculture production.

Introductory presentation (Danka Thalmeinerová, PA 4-SK) presented the assessment of SDGs related to water. The SDG6 aims to achieve universal access to safe and affordable drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene by 2030, while also improving water quality, increasing water-use efficiency, and protecting water-related ecosystems. It was highlighted that access to clean water is crucial for economic development, supporting sectors like agriculture, industry, and energy. Thus, the SDG6 is relevant for all pillars in EUSDR.

Threat of flash floods in the Danube Region due to climate extremes were provided by László Balatonyi (PA 5- HU). Initiatives such as Danube Forecasting Forum (DAFF), improved regional data in DanubeHIS are useful tools to address risk management and improve resilience in water sector.

Ana Kobasic (PA 6-HR) and Matej Marusic (DANUBEPARKS) showcased how working with nature rather than against it can create resilient ecosystems, enhance water security and support climate change adaptation. This was further illustrated through the Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative - the first river-focused Ramsar Regional Initiative in Europe, launched in 2024 as the Danube Strategy Flagship Initiative. It aims to foster international and cross-sector cooperation and promote nature-based solutions for sustainable river and wetland management across the Danube Region.



#### **Recommendations and follow-up actions to contribute to EUSDR objectives:**

- This event provided an opportunity to strengthen cooperation among thematically related Priority Areas and to address complex and interlinked environmental challenges affecting the Danube Region. It is recommended to attract the attention of other priority areas as well.
- The environmental pillar of the EUSDR is a mutual space for cooperation among EU and non-EU countries and issues of water and nature management should be addressed in coordinated way. The impacts of climate change are not limited to the administrative border. Thus, EU enlargement in environmental aspects is a must.
- Enhanced cooperation is needed among EU and non-EU countries in mobilising investments for joint flood and drought risk planning, regional warning systems, and addressing water pollution.
- All three priority areas (PA 4, PA 5 and PA 6) agreed to continue in joint activities to explore synergies towards sustainable development.

#### **Meeting of the Danube Youth Council**

An internal coordination meeting has been organised to review the progress of the working groups and assess the work carried out since the last Danube Youth Camp. The meeting, led by DYC spokesperson Bence Bíró, provided space for reflection and planning. Working in small groups, members reviewed the progress made since the last Danube Youth Camp and prepared for the months ahead, focusing on onboarding, alumni engagement, social media activity, and cooperation with the 2026 Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency.

Among other topics, the DYC members discussed the buddy system to support a smooth transition for new members, the functioning of the LinkedIn alumni group, and potential cooperation ideas with the 2026 EUSDR Bulgarian Presidency. Meanwhile, the social media team worked on new content for DYC's channels.



*DYC Members, Mr. Robert Lichtner and Mr. Raphael Sachs of the Danube Strategy Point  
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## **EUSDR PA 9 Event - Closing the Skills Gap: Green and Digital Skills for a Competitive Europe**

The session examined the persistent and widening skills gaps across the Danube Region and explored how labour markets, education and training systems can adapt to the green and digital transitions. Keynote speakers and panellists discussed the role of regional cooperation and inclusive approaches in ensuring that emerging opportunities benefit all groups in society.

Alongside the policy debate, the session showcased practical initiatives and transnational cooperation models, illustrating how innovation and partnerships can address skills challenges at regional level. The discussions highlighted that building inclusive and resilient skills ecosystems, strengthening active labour market policies, modernising education systems and deepening cross-border cooperation are essential to enhancing competitiveness and advancing the objectives of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

### **Main Topics Discussed:**

#### ***Skills Gaps and Labour Market Transformation***

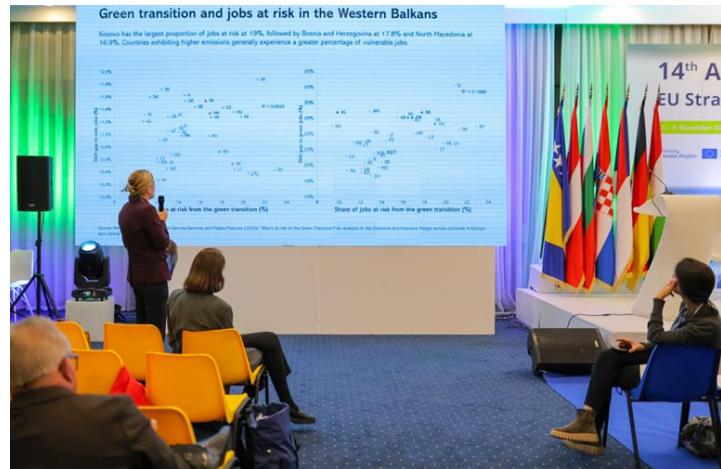
Participants noted that skills gaps in the Danube Region are widening due to demographic decline and rapidly changing labour market needs. Evidence from the Danube Region Monitor “People and Skills” points to uneven progress in tertiary education, digital competences, lifelong learning, and basic and citizenship skills, resulting in a growing mismatch between workforce capabilities and the demands of green and digital sectors. The green transition was seen to affect countries and groups unevenly, with particularly high risks in Western Balkan economies and among vulnerable groups, including women, older workers and employees in carbon-intensive sectors.

## **Modernisation of Education and Training Systems**

A central message was the need to modernise education and training systems by strengthening foundational skills, digital literacy, green competences and climate awareness at all levels. Empowering schools and teachers, ensuring equity and access, and expanding reskilling and upskilling opportunities were identified as key to enabling workers to adapt to changing labour market requirements and to closing existing skills gaps.

## **Regional Cooperation and Multi-Stakeholder Engagement**

The session emphasised that strong cooperation within and across countries is critical. Networks linking education and labour market stakeholders, economic development actors and other partners can improve policy alignment and enable peer learning. Regional and bilateral cooperation formats, consultation processes and knowledge transfer mechanisms were highlighted as effective tools for building capacity and achieving systemic impact.



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## **Social Inclusion and Equality**

Inclusive transition policies were highlighted as essential, particularly for groups disproportionately affected by labour market changes, such as women, older workers, low-skilled individuals and those employed in carbon-intensive sectors. Targeted support measures, flexible working arrangements, childcare solutions and empowerment initiatives were seen as vital to enabling full participation in the labour market. Examples from innovative projects demonstrated how tailored approaches can help overcome structural barriers.

## **Talent Retention and Brain Circulation**

Talent retention remains a key priority across the Danube Region. At the same time, participants underlined the potential of skills and experience gained abroad as an underutilised resource. Approaches such as dual-diploma schemes and international skills partnerships were discussed as ways to respond to labour market needs while acknowledging mobility. Emerging skills ecosystems in sectors such as additive manufacturing were presented as promising avenues to counter brain drain, generate new jobs and strengthen regional competitiveness.

## **Conclusions and Next Steps:**

The session concluded that addressing skills gaps in the Danube Region requires coordinated, inclusive and forward-looking action across education, labour market and regional development policies.

Participants agreed on the following key directions:

- **Inclusive approaches** are essential: labour market reforms must consider gender disparities, regional inequalities, and the needs of workers in vulnerable sectors.
- The Danube Region must prioritise **quality and equity in education**, investing in strong foundational skills and modern teaching approaches.
- **Lifelong learning and flexible training opportunities** are central to ensuring workers can transition into green and digital jobs.

- Leveraging the **skills of migrants and returning workers** can significantly contribute to addressing talent shortages.
- **Regional cooperation structures** should be further strengthened to enable peer learning, support VET excellence, and align policies across sectors.
- **Innovation-driven projects**, such as those focusing on additive manufacturing or social innovation, demonstrate strong potential for replication and upscaling.

Overall, the session reaffirmed that by fostering inclusive and resilient skills ecosystems and by intensifying regional cooperation, the Danube Region can better equip its workforce for future transitions, enhance competitiveness and make a strong contribution to the objectives of the EUSDR.

### **EUSDR PA 3 event- Eco-Culture in Motion: Green Tourism Initiatives as Part of the Sustainable Danube Network**

The panel examined the strategic contribution of tourism and culture to advancing the green and digital transition across the Danube Region. Discussions underscored the role of cultural heritage, sustainable mobility, ecotourism, and locally sourced products as catalysts for local and regional development. Particular emphasis was placed on modernising the tourism and cultural heritage offer through digitalisation, environmentally friendly solutions, and smart technologies.

Participants highlighted the importance of strengthening knowledge, skills, and professional management as essential for building resilient communities capable of responding to evolving ecological and digital demands. In this context, targeted actions aimed at valuing human resources, ensuring labour market equity, and validating professional competences were presented. These include the formal validation of skills acquired through non-formal or traditional learning, specialised training programmes for craftsmen, and international professional specialisation sessions - all contributing to safeguarding traditional knowledge and supporting sustainable cultural tourism.

The session addressed pathways for developing sustainable tourism products and services, including nature-based experiences, biodiversity protection, the promotion of local consumption, and the encouragement of low-impact mobility. Priority actions presented during the panel - such as the promotion of agritourism, ecotourism and fishing tourism; the expansion of rural tourism; and the valorisation of the Mediterranean diet and local organic production - are intended to underpin three new flagship initiatives supporting local identity and circular economy development.

Key challenges faced by rural and remote areas - economic dependence on traditional sectors, demographic decline, and limited diversification - were discussed, with tourism identified as a relevant driver of revitalisation. The panel also highlighted high-potential emerging tourism niches, including underwater cultural and natural heritage tourism, cultural and creative tourism, cultural-scientific tourism, and silver tourism.

Relevant regional initiatives and projects were presented as strategic models fostering cultural and creative tourism within a multi-destination, multidimensional framework, supported by macro-regional cooperation, knowledge transfer, and the development of innovative tools and methodologies.

Core principles of sustainable tourism were reaffirmed, including nature conservation, cultural preservation, preference for locally produced goods and services, low ecological footprint practices, and responsible, low-impact mobility. The panel also explored how tourism and culture can act as drivers of the green and digital transition, supporting territorial development across the Danube Region. This approach is aligned with the objectives of the PA 3-CLOSE project, funded by the Danube Region Programme, which supports the coordination of Priority Area 3 – Culture, Tourism and People-to-People Contacts.

The presentations highlighted the untapped potential of rural areas and the importance of promoting sustainable tourism experiences that conserve natural resources, preserve local culture, and strengthen local economies, thus contributing to the development of communities and the wider region.

**In conclusion**, the panel underscored the need for a long-term, integrated vision supported by coordinated EU, national, and private funding; enhanced public-private cooperation; and the development of high-value, cross-border tourism products capable of generating employment, retaining local value, and supporting the revitalisation of rural areas.

## **Public Conference on EUSDR PA 8 DECIDE project**

**Session host:** Centre for Digitalisation Böblingen District – ZD.BB GmbH, Germany

**Speakers (in alphabetical order by organisation):** Alumni Association of Petru Maior University (Romania), Mihai Timus; Centre for Digitalisation Böblingen District – ZD.BB GmbH (Germany), Claus Hoffmann and Severine-Jeanette Dommer; EUSDR Priority Area 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises / Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg (Germany), Carmen Hawkins; Reutlingen University, Herman Hollerith Centre (Germany), Tamara Korovin and Jan Fauser; Sarajevo Economic Region Development Agency (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Sanela Dzevljan and Faruk Cerić; University of Maribor (Slovenia), Tomaž Kern, Tilen Medved and Eva Krhač; University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology G.E. Palade of Targu Mures (Romania), Paula Pop-Nistor.

The fourth DECIDE Public Conference was successfully held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 6 November 2025, within the framework of the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum. It was a great privilege and an excellent opportunity to organise the event in this context, and sincere appreciation is extended to all partners and supporters who made it possible. Special thanks are extended to the EUSDR PA 8 coordinators, Carmen Hawkins and Karmen Marićić, for their outstanding cooperation and valuable support, which was instrumental in ensuring the success of the joint activities. The DECIDE Project is supported by the Interreg Danube Region Programme, co-funded by the European Union.

## **Main Topics and Key Messages:**

The DECIDE Public Conference presented some of the main outcomes and tools of the project “Digital Services for Circular Economy – A Toolbox for Regional Developers & SMEs”. The aim was to promote the digital and circular transformation of enterprises in the Danube Region, particularly through practical tools and methods, pilot projects, and policy recommendations. The strong interest in the topic was reflected in the impressive number of nearly 70 registrations.

## **The central topics of the conference included:**

- Presentation of the DECIDE Toolbox, a digital toolkit designed to support regional developers and enterprises in identifying and documenting key performance indicators in existing business models, optimising and assessing improvements in business models, and developing sustainable and circular-oriented business models.
- Introduction and demonstration of the DECIDE Service Catalogue, which serves as a low-threshold entry point to tools, best practices, pilot projects, training and workshop offers, and experts.
- Presentations of pilot projects from various countries and sectors, showcasing real-world applications of the circular economy, their economic, environmental, and social impacts, as well as an initial approach to developing policy recommendations in line with the EUSDR objectives.

## **Key Results and Recommendations:**

The presented pilot projects provided practical insights into various aspects of circular economy implementation. They demonstrated how material cycles and resource efficiency can be enhanced, for instance through the use of packaging made from recycled or biodegradable materials in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Romania, a pilot focusing on food reuse and waste reduction showcased the potential of producing dehydrated fruits and vegetables from leftovers as a sustainable business approach. Meanwhile, in Germany, the project highlighted renewable energy and sustainable urban development through the generation of energy from biomass, illustrating the environmental and economic benefits of circular solutions across different sectors and regions.

The conference underlined the importance of a multinational approach and cooperation between EU and non-EU countries. It also highlighted the role of universities and regional development agencies as key intermediaries connecting research, business, and policy.

Further information about the DECIDE project, its activities (e. g. workshops and events), results, and project partners contacts is available on the Interreg Danube Region DECIDE website: <https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/decide>.



## **Contribution to EUSDR Objectives and Possible Follow-up Activities**

The DECIDE project supports the implementation of EUSDR objectives by strengthening innovation capacity and competitiveness in the Danube Region. It promotes sustainable business models, develops a digital platform for the circular economy, and fosters cross-border knowledge exchange among businesses, academia, and public administration. In line with EUSDR Priority Area 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises, DECIDE

advances digital skills of entrepreneurs, establishes Trans-Danube Digital Value Chains based on Open Data Lakes, and enhances know-how transfer on digital innovations to local SMEs.

**The Danube Strategy Flagship 2024** Project DECIDE serves as a model project for future EUSDR initiatives, demonstrating how digital solutions and circular innovation can work hand in hand to foster sustainable growth in the Danube Region. Possible follow-up activities include expanding the Toolbox and Service Catalogue, launching new pilot projects, and integrating policy recommendations into regional strategies.



*EUSDR PA 8 Coordinators & DECIDE Project Partnership at the EUSDR Annual Forum 2025 in Sarajevo. Photo: Diana Schwarz-Dermann, Centre for Digitisation - ZD.BB GmbH*

## **Youth Engagement and Active Citizenship in the Danube Region - Interactive Workshop by Priority Area 10**

**Speakers:** Stefan Barth & Mirella Sidro, Danube Youth Organisations Network, Bence Bíró & Caroline Lercher Tauber, Danube Youth Council, Mubina Šašić, Enter:Change.

**Facilitator:** Marjana Tišler, Priority Area 10 Coordinator, Centre for European Perspective

The workshop on Youth Engagement and Active Citizenship in the Danube Region, organised by Priority Area 10, brought together young representatives from several key youth structures: the Danube Youth Council, the Danube Youth Organisations Network, and the Enter: Change initiative. Designed as an interactive World Café, the session aimed to create an open environment where participants could speak candidly about their experiences, expectations, and ideas for strengthening youth involvement in democratic and regional processes.

**Bence Bíró** presented the Danube Youth Position Paper, outlining young people's views in the Danube Region on pressing issues such as barriers to youth participation, volunteering, and the financing challenges faced by youth organisations.

This was followed by an interactive discussion facilitated by Caroline Lercher Tauber. Participants, including members of the Danube Youth Council, engaged actively and shared their perspectives on the importance of youth involvement. Throughout the discussions, one clear message emerged: young people are not only the leaders of tomorrow but also essential contributors to shaping decisions today. Participants in discussion with the Danube Youth Council stressed that involving youth brings fresh thinking, technological competence, openness, and a much-needed long-term outlook. Many pointed out that young people care deeply about societal challenges and have fewer entrenched biases, which allows them to approach problems with creativity and courage. Intergenerational cooperation was highlighted as crucial for improving the quality and legitimacy of policy outcomes.

The Danube Youth Organisations Network shared reflections on its own growth and the challenges young organisations face when trying to expand regionally. Participants expressed the need for greater visibility, sustainable funding opportunities, and clearer joint goals. They also recognised the value of building a strong alumni community and linking youth initiatives with local communities, including municipalities along the Danube and local tourism-related activities. This, they argued, would help create more connected, resilient networks across borders.

A significant part of the workshop focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Enter:Change project works with young people to develop leadership skills, strengthen democratic participation, and encourage cooperation across ethnic and political lines.

Participants discussed whether a new generation of young leaders could break away from old political habits and promote a more collaborative and trust-based approach to governance. They noted that this requires more accessible EU funding for emerging youth-led initiatives, better support for NGOs, and more opportunities that would motivate young people to remain engaged in their communities rather than seek opportunities abroad. Education, mentorship, and continued exposure to positive examples were seen as essential for sustaining such change.



*DYC members*

### **Conclusions and key messages:**

Across all discussion circles, several shared conclusions emerged.

- **Meaningful youth involvement** in public affairs is vital to strengthening democratic resilience in the region. Young people are ready to participate, but they need structured channels that allow their voices to be heard and integrated into decision-making.

- **Importance of capacity-building**—programmes that support leadership, negotiation, communication, and resilience to disinformation can make a powerful difference.
- **Cooperation across borders** remains a key element for the Danube Region’s development: cross national exchange helps young people understand shared challenges and work toward joint solutions.

### **Takeaways for EUSDR:**

Participants also highlighted practical steps that could help advance the EUSDR’s objectives. These include regular consultation mechanisms to ensure youth perspectives are systematically considered; more opportunities for cross-border cooperation and mobility; better outreach to youth organisations and education institutions to raise awareness of EUSDR activities; and support for small, youth-led initiatives through grants or CSR contributions. The idea of developing an alumni platform to bring together participants from different programmes was proposed to ensure sustained engagement and long-term impact.

Overall, the workshop demonstrated the enthusiasm and determination of young people across the Danube Region to contribute to democratic governance, social cohesion, and regional cooperation. The conversations showed that youth initiatives—whether structured councils, informal networks, or capacity-building programmes—play an important role in strengthening trust, transparency, and participation within their communities.

### **Closing of 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum and Farewell**

The 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum was officially closed by Ms Lea Nuhić, representative of the Directorate for European Integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In her closing remarks, she underlined the Annual Forum’s role in reaffirming cooperation, dialogue, and shared commitment among participating countries and stakeholders.

The Annual Forum focused on key thematic areas, including green and digital transitions, youth and skills development, cross-border cooperation, and the enlargement process, highlighting the need to translate strategic objectives into concrete actions at regional and local levels. As a city symbolising connection and dialogue, Sarajevo provided an appropriate setting for strengthening partnerships and building bridges across the Danube Region.

Ms Nuhić emphasised that, during Bosnia and Herzegovina’s EUSDR Presidency, the country aims to act as a catalyst for regional cooperation, European integration, and solidarity. She concluded by noting that the outcomes of the Annual Forum will guide further work within institutions, projects, and local communities, contributing to a greener, more connected, and more resilient Danube Region.



*Closing remarks by Ms. Nuhić  
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## **SIDE EVENTS ORGANISED WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR ANNUAL FORUM**

### **MONDAY, 3 NOVEMBER 2025**

#### **Steering Group Meeting EUSDR Priority Area 3**

The meeting focused on the strategic role of tourism and culture in fostering sustainable regional development and supporting the green and digital transition in the Danube Region. Discussions were framed within the context of post-2027 European policy processes, macro-regional cooperation, and ongoing project initiatives contributing to the objectives of EUSDR Priority Area 3 (PA 3).

In the opening session, the PA 3 coordination team together with the Bosnia and Herzegovina EUSDR Presidency outlined the objectives of the meeting, providing updates on post-2027 planning and creating space for exchange on ongoing and upcoming projects. National Coordinators from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Romania presented their perspectives, priorities and planned activities. Bosnia and Herzegovina shared its vision and key actions to ensure continuity, while Bulgaria introduced the priorities of its upcoming EUSDR Presidency, including preparations for the NC-PAC meeting and the EUSDR Annual Forum 2026. Romania highlighted national priorities, with particular attention to the Danube Delta and youth engagement.

Representatives of DG REGIO provided information on the consultation process for post-2027 cohesion policy, addressing issues related to governance, strategic alignment and the future positioning of macro-regional strategies.

The meeting also featured updates on ongoing initiatives. The PA3-CLOSE project presented implementation progress and forthcoming activities. The UN Tourism “Best Tourism Villages” initiative was introduced as an

innovative tool to support rural areas by reducing depopulation, promoting cultural heritage and creating local employment opportunities.

The ASTRA Museum shared practical examples of sustainable cultural tourism, focusing on community involvement and the preservation of intangible heritage. Contributions from CPMR and the EUSBSR highlighted opportunities for cross-macro-regional cooperation, particularly in the fields of coastal tourism, digitalisation and cultural heritage.

Youth representatives underlined the importance of ensuring adequate funding for participatory initiatives, mobility schemes, training opportunities and stronger youth inclusion in decision-making processes related to tourism and culture.

A series of project presentations showcased a wide range of actions supporting PA 3 objectives, including NONA, CULTHERIT, IBC-EUSAIR, Mystical, CommHeritour, People Powered Tourism, PlaceCRAFT, Danube Woods, CAST and EUI – Bistrița Năsăud.

The projects addressed themes such as heritage digitalisation, sustainable tourism development, community engagement and cultural innovation. Danube Strategy Flagship certificates were awarded to the NEBod Initiative – NONA, CULTHERIT and IBC, during a dedicated handover ceremony.

### **Conclusion and next steps:**

In the concluding discussion, participants emphasised the need for flexible funding instruments, pilot actions, and continued stakeholder consultations. The importance of supporting rural areas, strengthening macro-regional cooperation, and further developing PA 3 governance structures, thematic networks and knowledge exchange was highlighted. Sustainable tourism and culture were reaffirmed as key drivers of regional development in the Danube Region.

The meeting concluded with agreement on next steps, including the continuation of post-2027 consultations, enhanced macro-regional cooperation and efficient EUSDR governance. Participants also stressed the value of facilitating exchanges of good practices, supporting project development, and promoting tourism and culture initiatives, alongside the organisation of further stakeholder consultations and preparation of PA 3 contributions to the future programming framework.



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**TUESDAY, 4 NOVEMBER 2025**

**EUSDR PA 8 Event (DECIDE - Digital Services for Circular Economy - a Toolbox for Regional Developers & SME- project meeting)**

**Session host:** Centre for Digitalisation Böblingen District – ZD.BB GmbH, Germany

**Speakers (in alphabetical order by organisation):** Alecu Russo Balti State University (Moldova), Nelli Amarfii-Railean; Alumni Association of Petru Maior University (Romania), Mihai Timus; Centre for Digitalisation Böblingen District – ZD.BB GmbH (Germany), Claus Hoffmann, Martin Kinitzki and Severine Dommer; DBH Group (Hungary), Tibor Tarcsay; EUSDR Priority Area 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises / Ministry of Economy (Croatia), Karmen Marićić; Innovation Salzburg GmbH (Austria), Madeleine Koch; Pulp and Paper Institute (Slovenia), Tea Kapun; Reutlingen University, Herman Hollerith Centre (Germany), Jan Fauser; Sarajevo Economic Region Development Agency (Bosnia and Herzegovina); Sanela Dzevljan and Faruk Cerić; Social Cooperative Humana Nova (Croatia), Karolina Kraljić; Sofia University, Science and Research Department (Bulgaria), Tanya Yordanova; Technology Innovation Centre Međimurje Ltd. (Croatia), Igor Kovačić; University of Maribor (Slovenia), Tomaž Kern, Tilen Medved, Eva Krhač; University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology G.E. Palade of Targu Mureş (Romania), Paula Pop-Nistor.

**Main Topics and Key Messages:**

The project internal DECIDE Project Partner Meeting was successfully held in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 4 November 2025, within the framework of the 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum. It was a great privilege and an excellent opportunity to organise the meeting in this context, and sincere appreciation is extended to all partners and supporters who made it possible.

Special thanks were extended to the EUSDR PA 8 coordinators, Carmen Hawkins (DE/BW) and Karmen Marićić (HR), for their outstanding cooperation and valuable support, which was instrumental in ensuring the success of joint activities.

The internal DECIDE Project Partner Meeting served to present, evaluate, and align the project's results and ongoing activities. A major focus was placed on the eight pilot projects implemented across various sectors, including textiles, food, energy, packaging, batteries, and smart cities, and in several countries (Germany, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova). The status of these practical demonstrations of circular business models was presented, along with the results of their documentation and impact assessment, as well as the planned approach for developing policy recommendations. To support this process, input from project partners and guests was collected through a survey and a workshop. In addition, the planned design of the DECIDE Dashboard, a key component of the DECIDE Toolbox, was introduced, and feedback from project partners was gathered.

The meeting also presented the progress on the digital learning concept aimed at strengthening skills and knowledge related to Circular Economy Business Models. Finally, updates were shared on communication, dissemination, and overall project management, summarising the administrative progress and outreach activities carried out within the project.

## Key Results and Recommendations:

To advance the development of policy recommendations, project partners and guests contributed their insights through a survey and an interactive workshop. The meeting also provided a valuable platform for knowledge sharing, where partners exchanged experiences, best practices, and lessons learned from the pilot projects. In addition, the presentation and joint validation of results helped ensure that the project's outcomes are coherent, relevant, and well-aligned with its overall objectives.

Further information about the DECIDE project, its activities (e. g. workshops and events), results, and project partners contacts were made available at:

### Contribution to EUSDR Objectives and Possible Follow-up Activities



The DECIDE project supports the implementation of EUSDR objectives by strengthening innovation capacity and competitiveness in the Danube Region. It promotes sustainable business models, develops a digital platform for the circular economy, and fosters cross-border knowledge exchange among businesses, academia, and public administration. In line with EUSDR Priority Area 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises, DECIDE advances digital skills of entrepreneurs, establishes Trans-Danube Digital Value Chains based on Open Data Lakes, and enhances know-how transfer on digital innovations to local SMEs.

**The Danube Strategy Flagship 2024** Project DECIDE serves as a model project for future EUSDR initiatives, demonstrating how digital solutions and circular innovation can work hand in hand to foster sustainable growth in the Danube Region. Possible follow-up activities include expanding the Toolbox and Service Catalogue, launching new pilot projects, and integrating policy recommendations into regional strategies.



*Participants of the DECIDE Project Meeting at the EUSDR Annual Forum 2025 in Sarajevo, Photo: Diana Schwarz-Dermann, Centre for Digitisation - ZD.BB GmbH*

## Danube Transfer Centre Network Ceremony (EUSDR PA 8, RAIS, SERDA)

Members of the [Danube Transfer Center \(DTC\) Network](#) coordinated by [Steinbeis Europa Zentrum](#) gathered for the [annual DTC Network Ceremony](#). Opened with keynote speeches on the theme “*Advancing Integration and Innovation in Heritage and Green Transition in the Danube Region: Strengthening Skills, Connectivity, and Sustainable Development*” it well reflected the shared priorities and objectives of the forum and the DTC Network: jointly working to support shared prosperity, transformation and well-being throughout the Danube Region.

The event brought together a high-ranking delegation from members of the State Parliament, the Baden-Württemberg State Ministry, representatives from the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism, Coordinators of EUSDR Priority Areas 3,4,5, and 8, as well as officers from the Danube Strategy Point, all highlighting by their presence and contributions the DTC network’s strategic relevance and key role. Since its creation in 2012, the DTC Network has developed into a recognised lighthouse initiative for promoting innovation and strengthening knowledge and technology transfer in the Danube Region.

With 16 “Entry Points” and 41 DTC Hubs across 12 countries from the Danube Region, the network provides targeted expertise for organisations seeking to enhance competitiveness, international orientation and joint cooperation to increase innovation and technology transfer. In 2023, the network was awarded the title of “[Danube Strategy Flagship](#),” highlighting its contribution to macro-regional development and its effectiveness in translating EUSDR goals into practical and tangible outcomes.

This year’s ceremony played an important role in expanding and consolidating the network. It offered an opportunity to share updates on ongoing projects, exchange relevant strategic information, and demonstrate how cooperation within the network continues to generate initiatives and concrete joint activities aligned with EU priorities. The highlight of this years’ Ceremony was the addition of three new members to the DTC Network of both the City Development Agency East Sarajevo (RAIS) and the Sarajevo Economic Region Development Agency (SERDA) joined the Network as “DTC Policy Hubs”, while the Pomurje Technology Park (PTP) from Slovenia joined as a “DTC Business Hub”. Their Letters of Intent symbolised a shared commitment to innovation-driven regional development. The ceremony concluded with an active networking session that encouraged exchanges among participants and actively supported new cross-border collaborations.

The DTC Network serves as an effective model for cross-border technology transfer, connecting SMEs, universities, research institutions, and innovation actors throughout the Danube Region, thus, actively supporting and implementing EUSDR objectives. By facilitating SME support, the link between higher-education and industry, innovation projects, and capacity building, the network supports a more integrated regional innovation ecosystem. It also strengthens knowledge mobility and collaborative research, contributing directly to the creation of a competitive and cohesive macro-region.

The network’s activities are closely aligned with EUSDR priorities and its Priority Areas (PA), particularly in innovation, competitiveness, skills development, and economic modernisation. By working directly with SMEs and innovation actors, the DTCs contributes directly to PA 8 (Competitiveness of SMEs). In addition, the network’s involvement in amongst others Interreg, Horizon Europe, and Erasmus+ projects allows it to present concrete results at the EUSDR Annual Forum, demonstrating the added value of EU macro-regional cooperation.



© Steinbeis Europa Zentrum, picture; Photo: The DTC Network  
2025 including three new partners.

In summary, the Danube Transfer Center Network members play a vital role within the EUSDR Annual Forum by turning strategic objectives into concrete actions. Through the presentation of successful cooperation models, project results, and the integration of new partners, the DTC Network reinforces its position as a key driver of technological and economic development in the Danube Region and a valuable contributor to the objectives of the EUSDR.

## WEDNESDAY, 5 NOVEMBER 2025

### 27<sup>th</sup> Steering Group Meeting of EUSDR Priority Area 8 - Competitiveness of Enterprises

The meeting was co-chaired by PA8 Coordinators Karmen Maričić from the Ministry of Economy of Croatia and Carmen Hawkins from the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism of Baden-Württemberg. A total of 22 participants attended the meeting, representing Croatia, Germany, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Belgium, Hungary, Austria, Serbia, DG REGIO and Danube Strategy Point.

Discussions addressed a broad range of topics, including progress within the working groups on Circular Economy and Bioeconomy, Artificial Intelligence, Innovation and Technology Transfer and Digital Danube. Members reviewed progress of PA 8 Flagship and Lighthouse projects and explored new initiatives.

Furthermore, representative of DG REGIO shared an update on the European Commission's work programme for 2026 and provided an update on the proposed new EU's multi-annual financial framework (MFF). Updates from the Danube Youth Council highlighted strengthened structures, onboarding of new members, end of mandate of current members, and possibility for their continued collaboration with PA 8 as best practice. The meeting also covered communication and visibility activities, upcoming thematic exchange site visit and major events planned for 2026, reinforcing a shared commitment to competitiveness, innovation, and sustainable development across the Danube Region.



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## **EUSDR PA 8: Working Group meeting on Circular Economy and Bioeconomy**

The meeting of the Working Group on Circular Economy and Bioeconomy (WG CE&BE) of Priority Area 8 Enterprise Competitiveness of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), moderated by Grit Ackermann (Chamber of Commerce of Slovenia), aimed to promote the sustainable use of resources by integrating the principles of the circular economy and bioeconomy across the Danube Region, thereby contributing to fostering innovation and environmental sustainability.

At the beginning of the work, the participants were greeted by Karmen Maričić, coordinator of PA 8 (Ministry of Economy, Croatia).

Daniel Cosnita (CLUSTERO, Romania) informed about the introduction of the monthly newsletter. Dr. Nevena Cule informed the working group about the activities of the Forestry Institute of Serbia and the CEE2ACT - HORIZON project. Severine Dommer (ZD.BB, Germany) presented the project proposal "Building Artificial Intelligence Capacity in the Danube Region" and the call for potential partners for cooperation. The workshop on cross-sector partnerships for the incubation of value chains in the circular and bioeconomy in the context of open and upcoming calls was moderated by Daniel Chiran (Steinbeis Europa Zentrum). Goran M. Vasic (Bioeconomy Cluster - Serbia) presented the agenda for the upcoming study tour to be held in May 2026 in Croatia. The study tour will be dedicated to the topic of waste textile utilisation and cooperation between social entrepreneurship and the commercial sector. The event will be jointly organised as part of the final conference of the DECIDE Danube Strategy Flagship.



*Working Group on Circular Economy and Bioeconomy*

## THURSDAY, 6 NOVEMBER 2025

### Steering Group Meeting EUSDR PA 9

The 29<sup>th</sup> Steering Group Meeting of Priority Area 9 ‘People and Skills’ (PA 9) focused on updates on national and transnational developments and discuss current and upcoming initiatives relevant to education, labour markets, and social policy. The meeting started with a session on recent developments related to the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Inputs highlighted tentative priorities and activities under the upcoming Bulgarian EUSDR Presidency, information on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Call of the Interreg Danube Region Programme, and updates from the Danube Strategy Point.

A key thematic input was provided by the Vienna Institute of International Economic Studies (wiiw) on the [Danube Region Monitor ‘People & Skills’](#), summarising its main conclusions and policy recommendations. Its findings addressed skills gaps, demographic and labour-market challenges, and the need to strengthen education and labour market systems, lifelong learning, and inclusion across the Danube Region. Participating countries subsequently provided national updates, sharing ongoing reforms in education and training, labour-market developments, and social-policy priorities.

The meeting continued on 7 November, with an update from the European Commission, followed by a comprehensive overview of PA 9 activities, initiatives, and events:

- [1<sup>st</sup> International Conference of the Danube Labour Market Policy Platform for Roma Inclusion: Roma](#)

## Empowerment for the Common Labour Market - 20 Years of Successful Project Implementation in the Danube Region which took place on 16 and 17 October, in Vienna.

- 13<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the ESF Network in the Danube Region, 25-26 September 2025, Bratislava
- 4<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence, 30 September 2025, online

Partners, youth representatives and project presentations provided further insights into ongoing regional cooperation. The Education Reform Initiative of South-eastern Europe (ERI SEE) and the European Training Foundation provided updates on past, current, and upcoming activities. The Danube Youth Council presented their ongoing work on a recommendation paper aimed at easing the transition from education to employment.

Project presentations provided insights into progress under Interreg-supported initiatives, including TransAC, which focuses on developing skills for additive manufacturing to address brain drain, and WIN, which aims to strengthen women's participation in the labour market in peripheral regions.

The agenda, presentations and updated PA 9 work programme, are available on: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/events/pa9-event-during-the-14th-eusdr-annual-forum/>.

## **FRIDAY, 7 NOVEMBER 2025**

### **Training – EUSDR Policy analysis and advocacy skills**

This training was the second in a series of training sessions that Danube Strategy Point delivers for EUSDR core stakeholders, following the Capacity Building Needs Analysis that has been conducted.

The primary aim of these training modules is to support further enhancing the skills and competencies of new and/or existing EUSDR core stakeholders, such as National Coordinators (NCs), Priority Area Coordinators (PACs), and Steering Group (SG) members, to respond to their expressed needs and contribute to the Strategy's effective implementation.

This training session contributed to improving skills for effective policy analysis, design, advocacy, and communication of EUSDR core stakeholders. It also focused on enhancing advocacy skills that may help involve decision-makers and gain support for policy initiatives.

As a horizontal theme, "Cross-cultural administrative contexts" is incorporated into all trainings, ensuring that cross-cultural administrative perspectives are consistently addressed and integrated as a fundamental aspect.



## Exhibition Fair Showcasing Danube Programme Flagship Projects from Bosnia and Herzegovina

The 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum provided an opportunity for flagship projects funded under the Danube Programme to showcase and present their work through a dedicated project fair. The fair served as a platform for visibility, exchange, and networking, enabling projects to present their objectives, activities, and results to a wide range of stakeholders.

All interested project coordinators were offered an exhibition stand equipped with a TV screen, allowing for dynamic and interactive presentations. Among the projects presented at the fair were Caring Communities, WE.Circular – Boosting the Capacity of Women in Business for a Sustainable Transition to a Circular Economy, Culinary Trail, DRWO4.0, Green-Tex, Skills4Life, Spinit, and GeoNetSEE, among others.



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## **Participation Satisfaction Survey**

The 14<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum hosted 564 on-site and 193 online participants, for a total of 757 participants. The on-site figure also includes registered delegation members from 14 EUSDR participating states, as well as accredited media representatives and organisers.

Following the Forum, a satisfaction survey was conducted to assess participants' experiences and gather feedback for future improvements. The survey was sent to all registered participants and was completed by 75 respondents, using a 5-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied). A total of 75 responses were received, representing a response rate of approximately 10%. This provides a general overview of participant perceptions. Overall satisfaction was high, with an average rating of 4.5 out of 5.

In summary, the results indicate a high level of participant satisfaction, particularly with the opening of the Forum (4.7), social event and dinner offered by Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSDR Presidency (4.7), the registration process - both on-site and online (4.6) - and the support provided by staff (4.6).