

Danube Strategy Flagships 2024



INTRODUCTION

Danube Strategy Flagships are projects or processes that contribute to the implementation of the [EU Strategy for the Danube Region \(EUSDR\)](#), have a clear macro-regional dimension and a multi-level governance approach. They are of high importance for the Danube Region's economic, social and territorial cohesion and for improving the quality of life in the Danube Region.

Danube Strategy Flagships strengthen internal and external communication of the Strategy and the visibility of the topics, initiatives and prospects in the Danube Region. They illustrate the progress achieved in implementing the EUSDR and demonstrate exemplarily significant improvement in the Region that is induced by cooperation.

EUSDR National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators with the respective Steering Groups, in their capacity as representatives and key implementers of the EUSDR, as well as the Danube Strategy Point, are committed to contribute to and promote Danube Strategy Flagships in accordance with the [Guidance Paper for identifying and listing Danube Strategy Flagships](#).

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RIS Corridor Management Initiative *(new)*

Project; ongoing



EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 1a Waterways Mobility

COMEX² succeeds the international RIS COMEX project (2016-2022) and the CoRISMa project (2013-2015) and, with 20 partners from 13 countries and three cooperation partners from Switzerland, Serbia and Ukraine, will take up the baton for the harmonised implementation and optimisation of River Information Services (RIS) in Europe over the coming years. With a focus on the future-oriented further development of the transnational portals (EuRIS and CEERIS) as well as national systems and services, COMEX² also includes improving the resilience of the systems and services. Within the CEERIS portal, administrative processes are digitalised such as the reporting via the DAVID forms in the context of border control procedures.

Objectives: The already operational EuRIS Portal provides harmonised River Information Services (RIS) for the entire Danube Region and beyond according to legal provisions on European level. It thus meets the target of ensuring the online provision, availability and interoperability of up-to-date Fairway Information Services in the Danube Region. In the coming years, the services will be improved further.

Within the CEERIS portal, administrative processes are digitalised such as the reporting of the DAVID forms in the context of border control procedures, thus contributing to the simplification, harmonisation and digitalisation of administrative processes. The digital platform made border controls much more efficient and achieved a notable improvement of administrative procedures in inland navigation on the Danube and its navigable tributaries.

Need and (expected) impact: RIS (River Information Services) were implemented nationally in all Danube riparian states from the early 2000s. For inland navigation, which is largely cross-border, this meant retrieving fairway and traffic-related information from different national portals. In order to overcome the system boundaries between the individual national RIS implementations and to adapt the information services to cross-border inland navigation, a new service approach called "Corridor Management" was defined for RIS. In future, shipping operators will be able to access all information relevant to the execution of their transports and administer electronic reporting of transport related information from transnational portals EuRIS and CEERIS, which are already operational since 2022.

Macro-regional dimension: The following countries are connected within the EuRIS Portal: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, France, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia

Cooperation partners (not yet connected to EuRIS): Switzerland, Ukraine

The following countries are connected within the CEERIS Portal: Austria, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia

Countries envisaged to join the CEERIS portal in the coming year: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Serbia

To be extended towards Ukraine, Poland and Germany within COMEX²

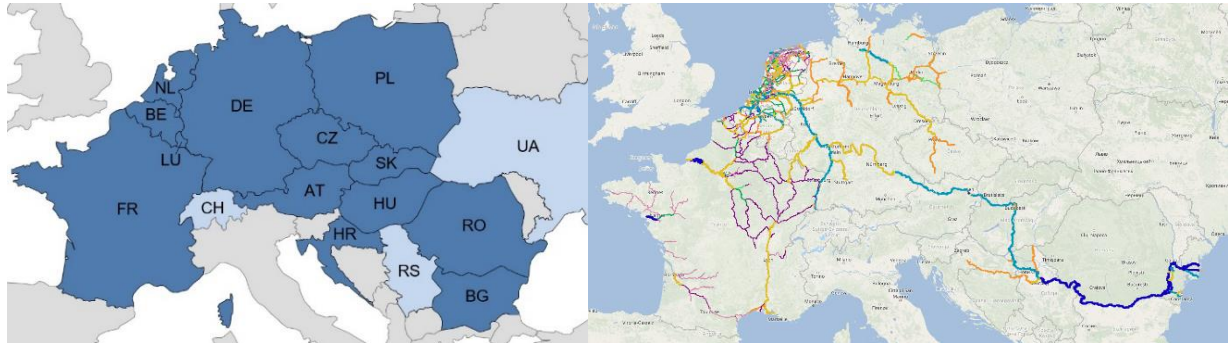
Stakeholders involved: Apart from the official national RIS providers (either state companies or departments of Ministries of Transport) implementing the project, the direct inclusion of the shipping industry (shipping companies, forwarders, sector representatives) as users of the portal is essential. In

stakeholder surveys as well as regular stakeholder contacts the sector requirements are systematically surveyed and incorporated into the specification of the new services.

Budget and Funding: Total project budget: EUR 36 456 050 co-funded by CEF2

Further information: <https://www.viadonau.org/en/company/project-database/comex2-river-information-services-corridor-management-execution2>

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X4ITS – Central European Cross-border Cooperation for ITS *(new)*

Project; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility

Activities within X4ITS are broadly described in four categories covering information management from collection of data in Central and Eastern Europe to the provision of information services for end-users:

- Measures to improve detection of incidents/conditions/status etc. on the corridor (through road side and mobile devices)
- Measures to manage collected data and making it available for neighbouring countries and management measures
- Measures to improve provision of services to end-users
- Measures to implement/upgrade a National Access Points as foreseen in the Delegation Regulation

Objectives: Improvement of cross-border traffic and transport and cooperation and deployment of ITS services. The project will enable traffic management, including route guidance supported by Traffic Management Centres and information services to travellers. Consequently, the project X4ITS contributed to Action 7 as it further develops Intelligent Traffic Systems (ITS) by using environmental-friendly technologies. Cross for ITS (X4ITS) strengthens the corridors of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) in Central and Eastern Europe. The X4ITS partners are working together on harmonised and synchronised cross-border Intelligent Transport Systems for a better connectivity in Europe.

Need and (expected) impact: Initial situation: The ITS landscape in the EU as well as in the Danube Region is characterised by different national approaches to the implementation of the ITS Directive and different speeds in the implementation of ITS services and C-ITS applications. In Central and Eastern Europe, the fragmented development is also characterised by geographical peculiarities – such as the coexistence of smaller countries with different languages.

Cross for ITS (X4ITS) strengthens the corridors of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) in Central and Eastern Europe. The X4ITS partners are working together on harmonised and synchronised cross-border Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) for a better connectivity in Europe and in the Danube Region.

Cross for ITS (X4ITS) unites public authorities, cities, public transport operators, the rail supply industry, road administrations and traffic information service providers from Eastern and Central Europe (AT, CZ, HR, HU, RO, SI). As a follow up of the previous CROCODILE phases, X4ITS will continue the work by maintaining achievements and opening new important fields of action.

CROCODILE was a project that preceded X4ITS. It started in 2013 with the participation of 10 countries from Eastern and Central Europe. The initiative aimed to overcome organisational barriers and establish an infrastructure for providing information on road traffic flows throughout the entire service chain. The exchange of data and information will be facilitated using common standards, resulting in high-quality end user information services and more efficient traffic flows. The partners collaborated in an integrated manner, conducting workshops to develop coordinated approaches and solutions for implementation.

The EU Member States are working together to improve cross-border traffic and transport through implementing harmonised and synchronised ITS applications on the high-level road network in those areas as well as implementing C-ITS use cases, based on C-Roads specifications in urban areas linked to the high-level road network.

X4ITS implementations will focus on better possibilities for data collection, processing and access, encompassing the installation of equipment, the upgrading of processes and drawing connections to the National Access Points, especially when it comes to the connections to the secondary road network as well as to multimodal (and/or urban) nodes. In East-Central Europe in particular, where several smaller countries (most of them having different languages) with lots of cross-border traffic, information exchange is a must. Therefore, X4ITS Member States and partners are committed to make data available along the whole corridor which should ultimately lead to high-quality end-user information services.

In addition, cross-corridor cooperation, with other corridor projects, will also be further enhanced by a joint process to elaborate a common and harmonised method for impact assessment. This common process on evaluation will go beyond the outcomes of the previous CROCODILE phases. It will highlight the environmental and safety related impact of X4ITS and its contribution to the key priorities within the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy, the decarbonisation and digitalisation of the EU transport sector, as well as in regards to achieving Vision Zero and accident reduction.

Macro-regional dimension: Project partner countries – Czechia, Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Croatia (Ministries and public authorities, road transport managers, users).

The X4ITS project has the potential to significantly contribute to the improved mobility and mobility data management in the Danube Region as it will:

1. improve cross-border traffic and transport,
2. implement harmonised ITS applications,
3. provide for the availability of data and optimise data exchange,
4. increase focus on secondary road network and multimodality and
5. implement C-ITS use cases in urban areas linked to high level road network.

The project is implemented in six EU member states of the Danube Region. Its success will have a spill-over effect to other countries in the Danube Region

Stakeholders involved:

Project leader:

- AustriaTech, Austria

Project partners:

- Autobahnen- und Schnellstraßen-Finanzierungs-Aktiengesellschaft (ASFINAG), (AT)
- Stadt Linz (LINZ), (AT)
- Amt der Salzburger Landesregierung (SALZ), (AT)
- Stadt Wien (VIE), (AT)
- Amt der Kärntner Landesregierung (Kärnten), (AT)
- Magistrat der Landeshauptstadt Klagenfurt (Klagenfurt), (AT), responsible for Affiliated Entity: KMG Klagenfurt Mobil GmbH (KMG)

- pdcp Gmbh (pdcp), (AT)
- Institut für Technologie und alternative Mobilität (IAM), (AT)
- Verkehrsauskunft Österreich VAO GmbH (VAO), (AT)
- Česká Republika - Ministerstvo dopravy (MDCR), (CZ)
- OLTIS Group AS (OLTIS), (CZ)
- Ředitelství Silnic a Dálnic CR (RSD CR), (CZ)
- Ministarstvo mora, prometa i infrastrukture (MMPI), (HR), responsible for Affiliated Entities: Hrvatske Ceste, D.o.o. za upravljanje, građenje i održavanje državnih cest (HC), Hrvatske Autoceste D.o.o za upravljanje, građenje i održavanje autocesta Croatian Motorways (HAC), Autocesta Zagreb-Macelj d.o.o (AZM), Bina-Istra dioničko društvo za financiranje, gradnju, upravljanje i održavanje autocesta (BINA)
- Budapest Közút Zrt. (BK), (HU)
- Magyar Közút Nonprofit Zrt. (MK), (HU)
- Építési és Közlekedési Minisztérium (ÉKM), (HU)
- Compania Națională de Administrare a Infrastructurii Rutiere (NCRIA), (RO)
- Mestna občina Ljubljana (MOL), (SI)
- Ministrstvo za infrastrukturo (MzI), (SI), responsible for Affiliated Entity Družba za avtoceste v Republiki Sloveniji d.d. (DARS)

Budget and Funding:

EUR 64 786 741

50 % contribution from Connecting Europe Facility 2 and 50 % from the national budgets of the six countries involved in the project.

Further information: <https://x4its.eu/> <https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/x4its>

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Diversification of gas supply in the EUSDR countries

Project, process, network; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 2 Sustainable Energy

The Russian gas import in many EUSDR countries lays well above 60%, which makes this part of Europe even more exposed than the EU average. The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis raise the security of supply concerns as never before. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to assess how to reduce gas import dependence in the Danube Region, how to diversify the energy supply of the Region's countries, accelerate the use of the untapped renewable and other alternative energy sources.

Objectives: Europe's sustainable energy policy has been dramatically impacted by Russia's military invasion of Ukraine and its consequences on the European energy systems. Rapid responses were formulated (e.g. REPowerEU), which aimed to reduce the EU's gas imports from Russia by nearly two thirds by the end of 2022, and to make Europe independent from all Russian fossil fuels well before 2030. These documents mark out the main areas of intervention to pave the way for an accelerated clean energy transition and enhanced market resilience, nevertheless details obviously need to be elaborated. European countries have great differences in their energy systems, national resources, infrastructures, economic development, etc. that determine their responses to these new challenges. This is even more relevant for the Danube Region, where regional disparities are huge and vulnerable consumers need to be protected in numerous provinces against volatile energy prices.

Different activities (studies, workshops, an online gas-market tool) within this Danube Strategy Flagship aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of the gas markets of the EUSDR countries, focussing on their vulnerability related to Russian gas import dependency.

Need and (expected) impact: The ongoing war of aggression on Ukraine has serious impacts on the security of energy supply, especially on those countries (most of the EUSDR countries belong to this category) that heavily depend on Russian gas import. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to deliver different scenarios, how these countries can diversify and secure their own energy supplies. The outcomes will highlight future potential pathways for reducing the Danube Region's dependence on the Russian gas import while still adhering to the European Green Deal. The results will also include proposed short-, mid- and long-term actions on how to diversify the energy supply of the Region's countries, accelerate the use of the untapped renewable and other alternative energy sources. Furthermore, the results will provide insights to the policy, regulatory, economic and implementation aspects of the green energy transition to stop EU's, and especially the central and east European regions' reliance on fossil gas import from Russia and propose concrete steps with modelled cost estimates and present showcases of decarbonised and efficient heating alternatives.

Macro-regional dimension: All EUSDR countries are cooperating and the expected impacts are relevant to all cooperating countries.

Stakeholders involved: Policy makers, regulators, industry representatives, system operators at EU, national and regional levels, as well as the wider public, as vulnerable consumers are the suffering targets of this geopolitical crisis.

Budget and Funding: Est. EUR 10 000/year (source: PAC project)

Contact: Ms Annamária Nádor, PAC PA 2, annamaria.nador@mfa.gov.hu

Enhancing hydrogen economy in the EUSDR countries

Project, process, network; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 2 Sustainable Energy

The Danube Strategy Flagship will coordinate actions to foster the development of hydrogen economies in the EUSDR countries at a macro-regional level, building on synergies of the national actions and the favourable natural/geographical conditions of the EUSDR (e.g., areas of excellent potentials for green hydrogen production from renewables, tremendous transport facilities: either natural, such as the Danube River, or artificial such as the extended gas infrastructures, etc.). It will analyse the entire hydrogen value-chain (production, transport/storage, end-uses) at a macro-regional level in a comprehensive way in order to make policy recommendations on how to adjust the different strengths/opportunities (e.g. production and transport capacities) and visions (e.g. various end-use development scenarios) at national levels into a transnational context, thus facilitating the development of a fully operational macro-regional hydrogen economy.

The Danube Strategy Flagship will also foster project generation (including IPCEI projects) in the hydrogen topic, and label selected successful project as flagships (e.g. HyEfre, Danube Indeet projects).

Objectives: To become climate-neutral by 2050 – in line with the European Green Deal – Europe needs to transform its energy system, which accounts for 75% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions. This is especially relevant for the EUSDR countries, whose energy systems are often more outdated and fossil fuel-dependent compared to Western Europe. Hydrogen – as an energy vector – can support the decarbonisation of industry, transport, power generation and buildings, and can power sectors that are not suitable for electrification. Furthermore, it can play a systemic role in the transition to renewable energy sources by providing a mechanism to flexibly transfer energy across sectors, time, and place. This wide-ranging potential of hydrogen provides excellent opportunities for the EUSDR countries to move their energy systems and economies further along the decarbonisation pathways according to their national potentials. The Danube Strategy Flagship's objective is to promote the development of a fully operational macro-regional hydrogen economy through different actions (macro-regional analyses, policy recommendations, dedicated workshops and policy conferences, successful projects, etc.)

Need and (expected) impact: Hydrogen economies – though getting an increasing importance in the EUSDR countries – are at their infancy (except for Austria, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg) compared to the western part of Europe. Only six countries have national hydrogen strategies (Germany, Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, Croatia and Hungary) and are in preparation at various stages in the other EUSDR countries. The different priority topics are defined at national levels according to their economic interests and possibilities and thus have a great variety among the countries (e.g. countries with existing gas pipelines and underground gas storage capacities prioritise the retrofitting of these infrastructures along gas blending with hydrogen and hydrogen storage). Nevertheless, these national strategies lack transnational aspects on how to match the different “puzzles” of the entire hydrogen value chain (production, transport/storage, end-uses) defined at national levels into a coherent macro-regional vision of a fully integrated and efficient energy system, where the amounts of produced (green) hydrogen is fulfilling the demand of various end users.

Macro-regional dimension: All EUSDR countries are cooperating and the expected impacts are relevant to all cooperating countries.

Stakeholders involved: National hydrogen clusters/associations, industry partners from the entire hydrogen value chain, academia, policy- and decision-makers, authorities.

Budget and Funding: Flagship projects with their own budgets (potential sources: centrally managed European programmes (Horizon Europe, LIFE Clean Energy Programme, Connecting Europe Facility Programme, etc.), Interreg Transnational Programmes (DRP, CE)

Flagship other process/network activities: est. EUR 10 000/year (source: PAC project)

Contact: Ms Annamária Nádor, PAC PA 2, annamaria.nador@mfa.gov.hu

Promote local low-carbon energy actions in the EUSDR countries

Project, process, network; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 2 Sustainable Energy

The collective and citizen-driven energy actions are key elements of the energy transition, however less widespread in the Danube Region, especially in its eastern part. The Danube Strategy Flagship covers activities that address various technical and socioeconomic aspects of creating appropriate conditions for renewable energy communities in the Danube Region. A special emphasis is put on renewable electricity generation as a cornerstone of energy communities, as well as issues of related infrastructure (grid expansion, grid balancing and associated energy storage solutions), but also deals with awareness raising on the benefits of such initiatives.

The Danube Strategy Flagship will enable the spread of comprehensive systems, such as e.g. the “European Energy Award” that facilitate the daily operation work of local authorities in their municipal energy planning, but also methods from other initiatives and related projects that support the set-up of new and the expansion of existing energy communities in a broader sense, to assist municipalities to elaborate their Sustainable Energy and Climate Action Plans (SECAP-s), enforce them joining the Covenant of Mayors, harmonise local policies to national and EU strategies, facilitate capacity building and benchmarking, etc.

Objectives: The Flagship activities (existing and future projects, knowledge sharing, development of municipal and expert networks) aim to coordinate and support local, citizen-driven energy actions in the Danube Region to enhance a clean energy transition and fight against energy poverty, thereby addressing Action 1 and Action 6 of the EUSDR Action Plan.

Need and (expected) impact: The collective and citizen-driven energy actions that help pave the way for a clean energy transition at local levels have an increasing importance in Europe. They contribute to growing public acceptance of renewable energy projects and make it easier to attract private investments. At the same time, they have the potential to provide direct benefits to citizens by increasing energy efficiency, lowering their energy bills and creating local job opportunities. Nevertheless, these initiatives are less common in the Danube Region, especially in its eastern part, where energy poverty is a main hurdle.

The Flagship activities are expected to contribute to a better developed and more energy conscious society in the Danube Region, with a higher number of municipalities adapting smart energy planning and management and monitoring systems as well as participating in relevant EU networks (e.g. Covenant of Mayors, Energy Communities, EEA, etc.) and less areas affected by energy poverty.

Macro-regional dimension: All EUSDR countries are cooperating and the expected impacts are relevant to all cooperating countries.

Stakeholders involved: Policymakers and authorities at national, regional (municipal) and local level, energy and climate agencies, energy suppliers, NGOs and engaged organisations and citizens.

Budget and Funding: Flagship projects with their own budgets (potential sources: Interreg Programmes, European City Facility Program).

Flagship other process/network activities: est. EUR 10 000/year (source: PAC project)

Contact: Ms Zsuzsa Bálintné Vörös, PA 2 Team, zsavoros@mfa.gov.hu

Danube Small Project Fund

Process; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 3 Culture & Tourism

Creativity, innovation and collaboration are the three key focuses of this grant. Proposals that are rather “business as usual” or already running projects/programmes are not a priority. We are especially looking for project proposals that initiate supplementary or experimental cultural actions. Innovation can be related to the theme of the project, the genre or the type of collaboration/co-creation represented by the action. The quality of collaboration will be an important part of the evaluation.

We do not have any preference for a specific artistic field or discipline within cultural work or the creative industries. We understand 'culture' as a very wide field covering work far beyond the classical arts and culture domain.

This first DSPF call has no further thematic requirements, restrictions or specifications.

Objectives: The Ministry of Science, Research and Arts Baden-Württemberg initiated a pilot action for the DSPF which is to elaborate the final structure and to test the long-term function of this innovative funding platform. The partners followed the initiative of the Ministry of Science, Research and Arts Baden-Württemberg and agreed to jointly establish a DSPF pilot implementation phase from 2021-2023. After this period, they continue to work and involved other interested entities.

The project is based on simple online calls at least once per year (depending on funding possibilities). Cultural actors in the Danube Region can describe their concepts and enter them into an online form to apply for funding.

Need and (expected) impact: For the elaboration of the DSPF structure, the international translation network Traduki was used as a role model. The concrete preparation of the fund was strongly supported by the long-standing experiences of the Working Community of the Danube Regions (ARGE Donauländer). The final structures and procedures have been discussed and confirmed by all Partners.

Macro-regional dimension: Most EUSDR participating countries are involved at this moment.

Stakeholders involved: The following partners have established a new alliance for culture and creativity in the Danube Region:

Institutional founders of the DSPF:

- Ministry of Science, Research and Arts Baden-Württemberg as initiator
- Province of Lower Austria/Working Community of the Danube Regions (ARGE Donauländer)
- City of Regensburg
- “Kulturreferentin” for the Danube Region at the Museum of the Danube Swabians (DZM) Ulm
- Donaübüro GmbH Ulm/Neu-Ulm

The first private partner and co-founder of the DSPF:

- Volksbank Ulm-Biberach eG

Associated partners:

- Danube Cultural Cluster
- Deutsches Kulturforum östliches Europa Potsdam

The DSPF project is coordinated by the European Danube Academy (EDA).

The list is open to all entities interested in better supporting and promoting creativity and cultural cooperation in the Danube Region.

Budget and Funding: The Danube Small Project Fund (DSPF) is a unique multi-stakeholder funding initiative that aims to support small-scale collaborative projects in the field of arts and culture in the Danube Region.

The DSPF is funded by financial contributions from various partners throughout the Danube Region. The sides agree to provide an annual financial contribution to the fund. The Ministry of Science, Research and Arts Baden-Württemberg and the Province of Lower Austria/Working Community of the Danube Regions (ARGE Donauländer) offered to contribute a higher annual lump sum which builds the fundament of this pilot initiative.

Further information: <https://danube-region.eu/danube-small-project-fund/>

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Danube Tourism Laboratories (DaTuLabs) *(new)*

Project, process, network, platform; in preparation

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 3 Culture & Tourism

The main output of the project will be the establishment of the Danube Tourism Laboratories (DaTuLabs). Activities of the Labs will include but not be limited to:

- the development of an online stakeholder's cooperation platform (Sustainable Tourism Resource Centre),
- drafting of the Transnational Danube Tourism Roadmap as support to the long-term destination development,
- use of the participatory tools for planning,
- co-designing tourism initiatives and
- fostering eco-friendly smart tourism initiatives.

The project will identify and engage a wide range of stakeholders, including tourism policymakers, tourism boards, academia, businesses, local communities and visitors. By providing stakeholders with the necessary tools, knowledge, and resources, the project aims to empower them to make informed decisions and take collaborative action towards sustainable tourism development. By combining cutting-edge technologies, participatory approaches, and cross-border cooperation, the project aims to unlock the socioeconomic potential of the Danube Region while preserving its natural and cultural heritage for future generations.

Objectives: The overall objective of the project is to improve sustainability and resilience in the tourism sector in the Danube Region through systematic, timely, and regular monitoring of tourism performance and its impact on sustainable growth. By fostering cross-border and transnational cooperation, the project seeks to activate destinations' responsible management of natural and cultural resources and reduce regional disparities caused by peripheral locations on state borders. The expected change from the project is to establish a framework for efficient planning and cooperation, valorise joint resources and skills, form joint structures of cross-border cooperation, promote good practices in the tourism field, and demonstrate ways in which tourism can contribute to social and economic cohesion in the Region.

Need and (expected) impact: The project aims to address the common challenge of sustainable tourism development in the Danube Region, which encompasses diverse landscapes, cultural heritage sites, and communities across multiple countries. Despite its immense potential, the region faces several common challenges, including the lack of relevant data and indicators for sustainable tourism planning, inadequate cross-border cooperation and management structures, disparities in socio economic level of development along the Danube as well as the risk of over-commercialisation and degradation of cultural and natural resources.

Macro-regional dimension: The project will take a transnational approach to address the complex and interconnected challenges of sustainable tourism development in the Danube Region. A transnational approach is needed to overcome differences in administrative structures, decision-making processes, and cultural contexts across borders. By fostering collaboration and shared responsibility among stakeholders from different countries, the project aims to maximise the impact of its initiatives and

create lasting benefits for the Danube Region as a whole. In the moment, partners from ten countries are collaborating directly in the project planning and proposal submitting to the 2nd DRP call (AT, CZ, SK, HU, HR, RS, RO, BG, UA with associated partner from MD).

The innovative and original project approach is to capitalise on participatory approaches, innovation and digitalisation, emphasising sustainability in every step. Development and establishment of Tourism Labs as an innovative solution will allow the destinations directly covered within the initial set of pilot areas as well as others in the Danube Region to address the challenges of sustainable tourism planning and development. By involving a wide group of stakeholders and strong local communities focusing on the co-design and co-creation of tourism initiatives, the project aims to ensure that solutions are tailored to local needs and opportunities and bring well-being to citizens on the local, regional and national level.

Stakeholders involved: Representatives of NGOs, academia, representatives of the entities at local/regional/national level related to coordinated domains of PA 3.

Budget and Funding: Danube Region Programme, Horizon 2020, Interreg Europe

Contact: Ms Irina Cozma, PAC PA 3, irina.cozma@mdlpa.gov.ro

New European Bauhaus on the Danube (The NEBoD Initiative) *(new)*

Project, process, network, platform; in preparation

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 3 Culture & Tourism

NEBoD is a think-and-do tank acting as an enabler for the green transition in the Danube Region through establishing a functional cooperation of public authorities, civil society, and the private, investment and financial sectors with the aim to improve capacities of cities and regions for triggering and implementing investments into more responsible land use practices as a basis for a new green and just economy. The initiative is also an innovative force, inventing and testing new methods and formats to involve different stakeholders into this transition and foster life-long education on all levels.

Objectives: The Danube Region is the one of the most diverse regions in Europe. Economic disparities are driving the Region's challenges, causing depopulation trends from rural to urban areas, from less to more affluent countries in the Danube Region. The Region's well preserved natural and cultural resources offer an opportunity for a new kind of development, yet their preservation is threatened by unsustainable development practices. There is a need to re-evaluate the value and potential of existing assets, including Degraded Areas (DAs), to prevent new land take. Revitalisation of DAs can contribute to a more sustainable territorial development, yet the process is hindered by a lack of capacities and efficient governance to mainstream investment in new, greener solutions in line with ecosystem capacities. NEBoD aims to develop and test new methods, work on concrete sites and deliver tangible results by:

1. Establishing an ecosystem of public actors, civil society and the private, industry, financial and insurance sectors, as well as experts and practitioners to develop up-to-date and financially viable solutions for quality future living; NEBoD will support communities in implementing concrete beautiful, inclusive and sustainable solutions on the ground as basis for quality living, as well as for creating green businesses and jobs
2. Developing new business and financial models for green investment to fund the green and just transformation; we want to bring especially the private investors, banks, insurance companies, industry on board to create a new "business as usual" development paradigm.
3. Conceive and implement new educational models like, i.e., the NEBoD Travelling Academy or the Green Investment Hub.

Need and (expected) impact: In line with aims of NEB and the EUSDR Priority Areas, cities and regions in the Danube Region will be supported in their transition to sustainable, beautiful and inclusive living spaces in line with the EU Green Deal by improving their cooperation with the private, financial and insurance sector to ensure green investment into concrete transformation projects, bringing tangible results on the ground. NEBoD is designed as a bottom-up driven process. Its aims at directly impacting the quality of life and work of local stakeholders and inhabitants. While acting as a support ecosystem for the Danube Region in general, NEBoD puts special focus to towns and regions outside major capitals and urban centres, where there is less access both to up-to-date knowledge as well as to financial and investment options, as well as less awareness about the EU policies and NEB itself. The general public plays a key role in ensuring that the values of the New European Bauhaus are brought to life on a day-to-day basis. In this respect, our key challenge is to communicate the NEB values in simple and

understandable language, translating the key elements of the green transition into concrete consequences for the everyday life of the people living in the Danube Region. NEBoD has also connected with other networks, such as the DANURB+ network, the Amazon of Europe, the UNESCO MAB programme etc.

Macro-regional dimension: To date partners are involved from: Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Ukraine

Stakeholders involved: Stakeholders from all levels (local/regional/macro-regional) are going to be involved in the future NEBoD activities for the Interreg Danube Region project NONA

Budget and Funding: NONA (DRP0200519) is funded in Interreg Danube Region/Cooperation - Priority 4: A better cooperation governance in the Danube Region. Total budget EUR 2 960 195. In addition, voluntary and unpaid activities of the initiative continue.

Further information:

- <https://nebod.eu/>
- <https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/nona>
- <https://www.conferencemanager.de/danubefutureworks/conference>

Contact: Mr Alexander Wetzig, Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, wetzig@hfg-ulm.de

Flagship Process on Adaption to Climate Change

Process; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 4 Water Quality

Climate change is a global challenge and it is a crosscutting issue. PA 4 supports a number of related actions in which water availability and water quality are key issues to climate change adaptation as stated in PA 4 Action 6 of the EUSDR Action Plan. Moreover, climate change issues are also part of PA 5 activities.

Among others, PA 4 organised a conference on adaptation to climate change in Budapest, HU, (2023) to showcase good practices and innovative, new approaches. The Priority Area supports a number of international projects on small water and nutrient retention measures (OPTAIN), local water retention measures (LIFE LOGOS 4 WATERS). PA 4 is assisting in the Danube Water Balance project, creating a water balance mode for the whole Danube River Basin. It actively supports the innovative water management initiatives of the DALIA project, DanubeSediment_Q2 in improving the management of sediment quantity and quality, RESTORIVER in the restoration of river banks and riparian areas and facilities other projects related to climate change.

Objectives: The process focused on climate change aims at sharing experience and best practices in climate change adaptation emphasising (green) water retention measures, which contribute to better water quality and water availability in the Danube Region. Many initiatives labelled as “climate change adaptation” have emerged in the Danube Region countries. This indicates growing awareness over the last decade on how important the adaptation component has become in numerous sectors of the economy. There are already good stories and first lessons learnt from introduction of novel approaches in water and landscape management. However, there are still a lot of challenges which need to be addressed jointly with support at political level from top-down viewpoint, and horizontally by various stakeholders and EUSDR Priority Areas.

Need and (expected) impact: Continuing climate change, especially climate extremes (floods and droughts), pose the challenges on water quality and water availability for all users. This includes increased uncertainty and variability of extreme weather events. Therefore, adaptation strategies in the water sector need to address several emerging trends driven by climate change as interventions on supply and demand side. While supply side adaptation options involve measures for water retention in the country, demand side include measures to ensure necessary water for key consumers and critical infrastructure, including ecosystems, always having the supply side in focus. The addressed water retention measures (e.g. polders, lakes, ditches, dams) flatten the flood waves, store the water for dry periods, enable recharging groundwater supplies, and are favourable for ecosystems. Moreover, the potential conflicts among users in drought periods must be clearly managed within emergency plans. Besides water accessibility from a quantitative point of view, the adequate water quality needs to be maintained.

Macro-regional dimension: Since climate change is a global problem, it concerns the whole Danube Region. Therefore, the adaptation measures will be functional and effective only in case they are applied transnationally, so at macro-regional level. Many of the Danube countries have already adopted the Climate Change Adaptation Strategies and applied first measures to avoid adverse impacts of

droughts/floods. However, still it is not enough and measures into practice should be supported and properly implemented.

Stakeholders involved: Policy- and decision-makers at government bodies of Danube Region countries, international water related bodies, think tanks, NGOs, the academic and research sector, land users, water service providers, and practitioners in urban planning. There is regular cooperation with the mentioned organisations, ensured by trilateral and SG meetings as well as joint events.

Budget and Funding: The process has already been partly financed by the implementation of the PA 4 relevant projects related to climate change. The transnational projects were financed by Interreg Central Europe, Interreg Danube Region Programme, Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe and LIFE programmes.

The new financing is needed to be allocated for climate change adaptation related projects and processes (e.g. negotiations, meetings, conferences, workshops and public awareness raising campaigns).

Further information:

- <https://www.optain.eu/>
- <https://dalia-danube.eu/>
- <https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/danube-water-balance>
- <https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/danubediment-q2%C2%A>
- <https://lifelogos4waters.bm.hu/en/home/>
- https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/sites/13/2019/09/Action_Plan_EUSDR-1.pdf

Contact: Mr Márton Pesel, PAC PA 4, pesel.marton@ovf.hu

Other: Adaptation to climate change is very difficult since there is often not enough relevant data which may lead to maladaptation: decisions may fail to meet their objectives, and they may even increase vulnerability of other systems. This is the case for the water management sector as well, e.g., construction of an irrigation system may result in water shortage as the consequence of climate change. The implementation of climate change adaptation measures should be considered in a complex way. When designing adaptation projects, there is a need to assess the negative externalities associated with infrastructure projects on both ecosystem and human sides.

Flagship Process on Emerging Substances

Process; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 4 Water Quality

PA 4 has been very active in the field of emerging substances as they represent a significant risk to the water environment. Although in accordance with Watch List of Directive 2000/60/EC (Water Framework Directive – WFD; Annex X – the substances are specified in detail in Directive 2013/39/EU), there is an obligation to monitor hazardous and emerging substances in surface water and for groundwater it is not compulsory. Since this list is continually enlarging, currently there is not enough relevant data available on their occurrence as well as on their impacts on ecosystems and humans.

PA 4 organised data collection on microplastic at WWTPs and is supporting international projects and project proposals on plastic and microplastic like Aquatic Plastic and MicroDrink.

Moreover, PA 4 in 2019 prepared a study on the pharmaceuticals occurrence in surface water and groundwater, which had positive impact on policymaking and development. As continuation to this topic, in the future PA 4 plans to organise a conference on pharmaceuticals occurrence in water when the respective legislation will be in place. The established cooperation with the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region in hazardous substance issues is promising to solve the challenges jointly.

PA 4 also strongly supports the implementation of the Thetys project, a coordinated Danube action to tackle water pollution by hazardous substances.

Objectives: As defined in the EUSDR Action Plan, Action 1 objectives:

- Close knowledge gaps on monitoring of hazardous and emerging substances in surface waters, biota and sediment
- Determine sources and pathways of hazardous and emerging substances emissions
- Quantify water emissions and loads
- Implement prevention and mitigation measures including a more comprehensive evaluation of measures' efficiency
- Contribute to capacity building in monitoring, modelling and management of hazardous substances pollution
- Contribute to improved quality of sediments

The Danube Strategy Flagship process will contribute to achieving the foreseen targets of PA 4 in the upcoming six years.

Need and (expected) impact: The Danube Strategy Flagship process will contribute to close the knowledge gap on monitoring of hazardous and emerging substances in surface waters, biota and sediment, and will provide updated information on the situation related to hazardous and emerging substances, such as pharmaceuticals, and microplastics in the Danube Region.

The future challenge is not only to monitor the occurrence of hazardous substances in the waters and sediments, but also to investigate their impacts and impacts of their metabolites to humans and biota.

Macro-regional dimension: PA 4 prolongs already established cooperation with the Baltic Strategy in the field of pharmaceuticals and their removal from waters. Based on the study completed in 2019, PA 4 is planning to organise the international pharmaceutical conference in the future when respected legislation will be valid.

In the past, PA 4 organised two MRS meetings focusing on water issues and there was one study elaborated about Macro-regional Strategies by our HU partner (TRENECON company). The first meeting was attended by representatives by all 4 MRS (Baltic, Danube, Adriatic-Ionian and Alpine) and there was excellent exchange of knowledge and experience, especially on hazardous substances in the water.

Stakeholders involved: PA 4 SG members; Baltic Strategy experts; DG ENVIRONMENT experts; International Commission for Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR); International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC); Global Water Partnership Central and Eastern Europe (GWP CEE); NGOs active in plastic pollution; Water companies; laboratories, etc.

Regular cooperation with the mentioned organisations, ensured by trilateral and SG meetings, joint events.

Budget and Funding: PAC2 PA 4 project contains a budget for implementing PA 4 actions, including topics listed in this Danube Strategy Flagship process. The process has already been partly financed by the implementation of the PA 4 relevant projects related to hazardous substances, e.g., projects implemented: The abovementioned projects are financed by Interreg Danube Region Programme.

The new financing should be allocated for monitoring of hazardous and emerging substances occurrence and for investigation of their impacts on humans and ecosystems. The process will be supported by organisation of events and public awareness raising campaigns, e.g. meetings, conferences, workshops.

Further information:

- <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/>
- <https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/aquatic-plastic>
- <https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/microdrink>

Contact: Mr Márton Pesel, PAC PA 4, pesel.marton@ovf.hu

Other: Process includes also:

- Aquatic Plastic project
- MicroDrink project
- Thetys project
- D-CLEAN project
- Small project on microplastic at WWTPs
- bo-DEREC-CE project
- Study on occurrence of pharmaceuticals in the waters of the Danube Region
- Pharmaceuticals cooperation with the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR)
- Planned pharmaceuticals conference

Flagship Process on Migratory Fish

Process; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 4 Water Quality

PA 4 in cooperation with PA 6 is very active on increasing the knowledge base on migratory fish species, including the sturgeon – the Danube endemic fish species – and is looking for possibilities of re-establishing their migration routes. PA 4 supports international projects like Monstur project to establish, test and launch a transboundary system to monitor sturgeon species for the management and protection of migratory fish in the Danube basin or We Pass I and II and Living Rivers projects to enable fish migration at the Iron Gates and Gabčíkovo Water Structure. PA4 presented a brochure “Promoting Measures to Enable Fish Migration in the Danube River Basin” summarising the current knowledge, carried out a study on the effects of noise and waves on fish species and a fish migration restoration document, prepared an animated film about sterlets, and organised a working meeting regarding fish migration “From Iron Gates to Gabčíkovo Water Structure”. PA 4 is continuously promoting hydro-morphological measures to achieve a good ecological status of waters needed for fish migration.

Objectives: PA 4 Action Plan, Action 5 objectives:

- raising broad public awareness for the Danube sturgeons as Flagship Species for the Danube River Basin and for the ecosystems and biodiversity of the Danube River Basin as a whole;
- fostering sturgeon conservation activities including protection of habitats, restoration of fish migration routes and ex-situ conservation measures;
- closing knowledge gaps concerning monitoring of pressures and planning of measures for fish migration in coordination with PA 6 (Action 3).

Need and (expected) impact: In May 2024, PA 4 organised the fish migration working meeting “From Iron Gates to Gabčíkovo Water Structure” in, which provided the platform for discussion about behaviour of migratory fish species and about technical solutions of fish pass designs, especially the Iron Gates and Gabčíkovo Water Structure. In addition, PA 4 prepared brochure “Promoting Measures to Enable Fish Migration in the Danube River Basin” and the fish migration restoration document. The document provides a database of relevant information on migratory fish restoration (e.g., methodologies, the investigation on behaviour of fish species; an overview of ichthyocenoses in the Middle and Upper Danube); and estimates alternative technical solutions of fish pass design for specific migratory fish at Gabčíkovo Water Structure. To support visibility of the topic, PA4 completed short animated film “Why is it a challenge to be a migratory fish species?”

Macro-regional dimension: Migratory fish species (e.g., sturgeons) can spawn only in the river without barriers and borders, hence this process will affect all countries on the Danube River. Conservation measures will be effective only in case they are applied at macro-regional level. Moreover, countries and operators of the Iron Gates and Gabčíkovo Water Structure should closely cooperate for creating the most feasible solution for fish passes.

Stakeholders involved: ICPDR; PA 6 – DSTF; related projects leaders, related hydropower operators (e.g., Water Construction, Slovakia, Hidroelectrica), experts on migratory fish protection in Danube Region, experts in the field of technical design of fish passes, international organisations, PA 4 SG members, etc.

Budget and Funding: The process has already been partly financed by implementation of the PA 4 relevant projects related to sturgeons. The transnational projects are financed by the European Commission, Interreg Danube Region Programme and LIFE Programme.

The new financing should be allocated for sturgeon conservation measures projects and processes (e.g., negotiations, meetings, conferences, workshops and public awareness raising campaigns).

Further information:

- <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/from-iron-gates-to-gabcikovo-water-structure-working-meeting/>
- <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/promoting-measures-to-enable-fish-migration-in-the-danube-river-basin/>
- <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/why-is-it-a-challenge-to-be-a-migratory-fish-species/>
- <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/fish-migration-restoration-document/>
- <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/fish-migration-restoration-working-meeting/>
- <https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/ship-noise-and-water-wave-measurement-on-the-hungarian-section-of-the-danube/>
- <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/measures>
- <https://www.we-pass.org/>

Contact: Ms Andrea Vranovská, PA 4 team member, Water Research Institute, Bratislava, SK, andrea.vranovska@vuvh.sk

Other: There are two major barriers on the Danube River for migratory fish species – Iron Gates in Romania/ Serbia and Gabčíkovo Water Structure/Dunakiliti in Slovakia/Hungary. Construction of fish passes in Iron Gates can serve as information base for construction of other fish passes in Danube River (e.g., Gabčíkovo, and upper Danube ones). The Migratory Fish Danube Strategy Flagship Process will make an effort to facilitate removing the fish barriers in the Danube River.

Nature-based Solutions for Flood Risk Reduction in the Danube Region

Platform; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 5 Environmental Risks

Nature-based solutions (NBS) for flood risk reduction are interventions inspired and supported by nature, providing cost-effective environmental, social, and economic benefits while building resilience. These solutions enhance urban and rural landscapes by integrating natural features and processes, often allowing nature to self-sustain (e.g., river restoration). In flood risk management, NBS involve managing erosion and flood risks by leveraging natural regulatory functions of catchments and coasts, promoting human well-being and biodiversity.

Recent decades have seen a push for flexible, multifunctional solutions in flood risk management, leading to the rise of NBS. These solutions mitigate flood impacts like erosion and sedimentation, reduce drought risk, and offer other benefits. NBS can be purely natural ("green") or hybrid, combining natural and engineered elements, embodying the concept of "making more space for rivers" and necessitating basin-level flood protection planning.

To advance NBS, an online workshop in October 2022, organised by EUSDR PA 5 with the involvement of PA 4 Water Quality and PA 6 Biodiversity, showcased successful projects from 17 countries. These included initiatives like the Danube Floodplain Projects, FRAMWAT, MERLIN, Optain, and Danube4All. Key recommendations from the workshop included sub-basin level NBS design, advocating for supportive legislation, promoting case studies, and disseminating information on water retention strategies.

The Global Water Partnership (GWP) has established a mission to define, design and launch a community of practice (CoP) related to NBS in 2022. The community will build on the GWP Toolbox – IWRM action hub, which GWP has recently developed and launched.

The Interreg Europe NBS4LOCAL project, launched in March 2023, aims to integrate NBS into policy instruments, supporting local authorities with regulatory measures and resource allocation. Additionally, a study on advancing NBS in hillside water management and the establishment of the Nature-based Solutions Hub (TeAM HUB) in Hungary highlight ongoing efforts.

EUSDR PA 5's platform on NBS for flood risk reduction provides examples and policy recommendations across the Danube Region. Effective flood management is crucial for protecting communities and assets. NBS, alongside traditional engineering ("gray infrastructure"), offer sustainable alternatives by utilising natural processes for flood risk reduction and improving water quality.

Objectives:

- Providing practical examples and evidence of effective NBS projects that enhance flood risk management and climate resilience.
- Promoting knowledge exchange and capacity building through workshops and collaborative projects.
- Supporting policy recommendations and legislative changes that facilitate the adoption of NBS, contributing to both flood risk management and climate change adaptation goals.

Thus, the initiatives on NBS for flood risk reduction in the Danube Region are making significant strides toward achieving the specified actions and targets, ensuring a comprehensive and resilient approach to environmental and flood risk management.

Need and (expected) impact: The Danube Region faces significant flood risks due to diverse topography, extensive river networks, and climate variability. Traditional "gray" infrastructure for flood management is costly, environmentally damaging, and insufficient for addressing increasing climate challenges.

Relevance and Added Value

- Supports EUSDR PA 5 goals (Actions and Targets as defined in the EUSDR Action Plan), particularly in Environmental Risks and Water Quality and Biodiversity (PILAR)
- Ecological and Social Benefits: Enhances biodiversity, improves water quality, and provides recreational spaces.
- Economic Efficiency: Offers long-term cost savings and valuable ecosystem services.
- Comprehensive Flood Management: Integrates NBS into basin-level strategies, preventing downstream effects.

Impact on the Danube Region

- Enhanced Resilience: Improved flood and drought resilience through natural floodplain and wetland restoration.
- Climate Adaptation: Support for regional adaptation to climate change impacts by utilising natural processes for flood management.

Macro-regional dimension: All Danube Region countries, and in the frame of the LIFE SANDBOIL project another macro-regional strategy is involved, since Italy (Po-river basin) is the lead partner.

Stakeholders involved: Involved stakeholders include Hungarian Ministries (Ministry of Public Administration and Regional Development, Ministry of Interior of Hungary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary), Water Authorities, Municipalities, Universities, and NGOs like ICPDR, GWP (CEE) and WWF.

Budget and Funding: Funding sources encompass CBC Programmes, Interreg DRP, Horizon Europe, and LIFE programmes.

Further information: <https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/>

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Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative *(new)*

Network; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality



The Danube WILDisland RRI is intended as the first river-focused Ramsar Regional Initiative in Europe to foster international and cross-sector cooperation and natural river and island protection, at the world's most international river. The Initiative is intended as a long-term collaborative effort between countries and entities for the entire Danube Region, the Ramsar Convention Secretariat, intergovernmental institutions, international non-governmental organisations and national institutions specialised in wetland issues, and finally, Danube protected areas, which aims to ensure the effective conservation of wetlands and the wise use of their resources, values and services within the framework of the Ramsar Convention. It will strive to provide practical means for international cooperation and support for an effective implementation of the Ramsar Convention and its Strategic Plan in the Danube Region, for improving the visibility of the Ramsar Convention and wetland-related issues of common concern through voluntary international cooperation at regional level and, in particular, involving all relevant national and regional stakeholders.

It will assist the participating Member States to further advance the goals and adhere to their obligations related to wetlands conservation in the frame of the Ramsar Convention. The RRI will strive to mobilise political support, to strengthen the Danube as an ecological corridor connecting more bio-geographic regions than any other corridor in Europe, and act as an example of best practices for the establishment of European Green and Blue Infrastructure.

Objectives: Considering river dynamics, intact morphological processes and sediment regime as fundamental elements for the long-term conservation of riverine wetlands, as well as the outstanding value, beauty and fascination of islands in the same time, the Danube islands can act as “flagship habitats”, stressing conservation and restoration of river dynamics, natural hydrological regimes and the Danube natural treasures.

The Danube WILDisland objectives are:

1. to promote the effective implementation of the Ramsar Strategic Plan, pertinent Ramsar Resolutions and relevant policies and initiatives in the Danube Region by supporting actions on the ground by governments, civil society organisations and the private sector;
2. to foster international and cross-sector cooperation and natural river island protection, gain political support to strengthen the Danube as an ecological corridor connecting more bio-geographic regions than any other corridor in Europe, and act as an example of best practices for the establishment of European Green and Blue Infrastructure, stressing on restoring river dynamics and natural hydrological regimes;
3. to preserve, develop and restore the Danube River, its adjacent floodplains and main tributaries as an integrating ecosystem and inspiring lifeline for the new European macro-region and its inhabitants;

4. to reinforce capacities in areas where these are not sufficiently developed, and especially to develop and ensure adaptive and integrated management and wise-use of Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites) and other wetlands.

Need and (expected) impact: The Danube WILDisland RRI is designed as an international network uniting the efforts of various stakeholders and institutions under the umbrella of the Convention on Wetlands and will have the following direct positive impact and synergies with PA 6:

- Direct relevance to four out of six goals of PA 6;
- Additional political visibility and recognition of PA 6 and the EUSDR on an international, national and local scale;
- Bottom-up approach and connections with practical needs of the stakeholders;
- Potential for shaping policies and decision-making in the Danube Region;
- Potential for participation in practical conservation projects and initiatives;

At the same time, the Danube WILDisland RRI is established as:

- the first river-based RRI in Europe
- a good practice example for other large rivers (in Europe)
- connecting existing RRI (CWI & BlackSeaWet)
- new dimension of Ramsar management (non-intervention vs. wise-use)
- further extension possible to UNESCO TBR Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere Reserve

The project will create unique protected areas and a useful network in the Danube Region and show practical implementation of the Ramsar Strategic Plan and Biodiversity Strategy.

Macro-regional dimension: The Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative will actively involve the relevant Ramsar Administrative Authorities (National Focal Points, the STRP National Focal Points as well as the CEPA Focal Points) in the following Member Countries: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine (already submitted National Letters of support).

As such, it represents an excellent opportunity for EUSDR and the Danube WILDisland to link the Convention on Wetlands with the EU Macro-regional Strategies as the already existing EUSBR & NorBalWet, EUSAIR & MedWet.

Stakeholders involved: The Danube WILDisland RRI will engage parties and stakeholders through participating governance and effective coordination through an annual meeting of governance bodies, international workshops, newsletters and a public website.

The RRI will be managed by a Steering Group, including Country-, Non-Country Members (with the right to vote) and Observers. This guarantees full transparency and accountability of the decision-making process, which will consider the interests of all parties involved, including that of the Ramsar Secretariat (as a permanent observer).

Furthermore, the Danube WILDisland RRI comprises two integrative Non-Country Members (ICPDR and DANUBE PARKS Association), which have own membership structures, guaranteeing all parties involved will be involved in the development and implementation of the work plans and RRI activities.

As a regional office of the DANUBEPARKS Association, the Coordinating Unit of the Danube WILDisland RRI will also report to the Management Board of the Association and actively involve all its members, a total of 21 Protected Area Directorates and NGOs from a total of nine Danube countries.

The involvement of these actors, as the ones responsible for the practical management and conservation of the most valuable sections of the Danube basin guarantees the application of the bottom-up approach, providing a vivid link between the site managers and the responsible authorities, meaning the selection of the optimal and most efficient solutions for adequate protection and promotion of wetlands, especially tailored to address particular local needs.

Through the existing network and working cooperation of the DANUBEPARKS Association, the Danube WILDisland RRI will also actively involve and work in close cooperation with a number of other local authorities and stakeholders from the hydropower (such as Uniper, DE; Verbund, AT), waterway navigation (such as viadonau, AT; aduvizig, HU) and forestry sectors (such as Hrvatske sume, CR; Vojvodinasume, SR; Romsilva, RO; Moldsilva; MD).

Budget and Funding: Start-up funding from Core Ramsar Budget of CHF 29 000 approved for 2024. The Initiative is eligible for further funding for the period 2025-2027 expected to be confirmed at Ramsar CoP15 in 2025.

Funding proposal submitted to the German Advisory Assistance Programme for seed funding for 2024-2027 at the amount of EUR 224 500, negotiations ongoing. INTERREG project to be submitted in 2025.

Further information: <https://wildisland.danubeparks.org>

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Other: The proposal for the Danube WILDisland RRI was developed within the LIFE WILDisland project funded by the European Commission and coordinated by the Donau-Auen National Park, Austria.

HARMONMISSIONS – Harmonisation of Missions in the Danube Region *(new)*

Project; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 7 Knowledge Society

Interreg
Danube RegionCo-funded by
the European Union

The main objective is to harmonise the implementation of the European missions on the Danube Region level.

We observe significant disparities in the level of understanding, setup, and implementation of the European missions among European regions.

Within the proposed project, we aim to minimise these disparities in Missions 1 and 4 and help set up an effective Missions governing model on the Danube Region level and thus reinforce the position of the Danube Region in the implementation of the EU environment.

Objectives:

SO1 - Danube Region governance model for Climate oriented EU Missions

The project will introduce a new governance model for the European Missions based on the Danube Region countries' specific needs to become an important element of the European Missions-oriented ecosystem. The established Steering Committee and Advisory Groups will contribute to linking relevant actors from different levels oriented towards the climate-oriented areas of the EU Missions.

SO2 - Danube Region transnational cooperation for Climate oriented EU Missions

The project will facilitate transnational cooperation between EU Missions' national and regional authorities to identify and share good practices and raise participation in the EU Missions in general.

Under this Specific Objective 2, three platforms united under one website dedicated to EU Missions in the Danube Region will be established to share best practices in the Region on EU climate missions. The platforms will also offer the possibility to more efficiently and easily find partners in consortia for projects dedicated to areas 1 (Adaptation to Climate Change) and 4 (100 Climate-neutral Cities by 2030) of the EU Mission.

Platforms:

- SHARED platform: platform for sharing lessons learned at the regional level and best practices in the Climate oriented EU Missions
- EMO platform: European Mission Observatory platform - the EMO platform will continuously provide up-to-date information on current EU Missions, open project calls, events and relevant legislative changes.
- CCC platform: platform for sharing best practices toward Climate City Contract

SO3 - Danube Region interactions for Climate oriented EU Missions

SO3 aims to raise awareness of EU Missions, to inform the widest possible audience of stakeholders by communicating and disseminating campaigns, to involve citizens in the Missions' implementation.

The activities are focused on capacity building, facilitating networking and formation of partnerships for setting up project consortia for future applications in the Horizon Europe Missions calls for proposals.

Need and (expected) impact: The HARMONMISSIONS project is intended by its activities to be the beginning of setting up cooperation between the countries in the Danube Region in the field of Climate-oriented EU Missions.

Macro-regional dimension: In the Danube Region, we find that many areas are considerably affected by environmental threats. The planned economy of the past socialist regime preferred economic production in heavy industry, which greatly damaged the environment. The consequences can still be seen today. These are significant not only directly for the environment but also for the health of the population in the Region.

EU Missions themes represent the current challenges of 21st-century society. They are topical, but it can be assumed that their importance will continuously increase over time. They, therefore, need to be addressed now to leave a better and healthier Europe for future generations.

In the Danube Region, the need to be actively involved in EU mission projects is all the greater than in other EU regions, which makes the need to address these challenges more pressing. The project activities will focus on missions 1 ("Climate change") and 4 ("Cities"). These two missions directly address climate issues and acknowledge a special position for regions and municipalities in tackling these topics. As the countries of the Danube Region are considerably affected in these areas, according to Eurostat, the project intends to create an organisational structure for cooperation in these missions.

Overall, 11 PPs from 9 Danube Region countries will be involved in the project (Slovakia, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Ukraine).

Stakeholders involved: An important goal of the project is to engage various stakeholders from national, regional, and local public authorities, sectoral agencies, infrastructure, and (public) service providers, higher education and research organisations, and the general public.

Many of these stakeholders will be directly involved in HARMONMISSIONS as project or associated partners.

With others, a Memorandum of Understanding will be signed to enhance cooperation.

Budget and Funding: EUR 1 717 141 (80% funded by ERDF)

Further information: <https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/harmonmissions>

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Multilateral Danube Call *(new)*

Process, multilateral call; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 7 Knowledge Society

The joint funding instrument MULTILATERAL SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL COOPERATION IN THE DANUBE REGION was created based on existing bilateral cooperation programmes. Using already tested application and evaluation schemes lowers the bureaucratic burden for both applicants and implementing agencies.

Objectives: The overall aim of this call is to support project cooperation in the Danube Region among the participating EUSDR countries.

- To contribute to scientific advancement in the abovementioned countries by funding researchers' mobility in the frame of joint research projects;
- To contribute to research capacity development in the Region;
- To support the advancement of cross-border research cooperation;
- To provide an opportunity for young/female researchers in the abovementioned countries to cooperate in an international setting and to develop their scientific careers;
- To facilitate the joint participation in European research projects;
- To promote involvement of the Danube countries in the European Research Area;

Need and (expected) impact: The strengthening of collaborations in the Danube Region should lead to the increased submission of joint cross-border project in different national and EU funding schemes and raise the scientific excellence in the Danube Region.

Macro-regional dimension: The Multilateral Call for the Danube Region was specifically created to foster science cooperation between the countries of the Danube Region, focusing on creating new partnerships.

Stakeholders involved: Ministries for Education, Science and Research and National Funding Agencies for the policy as well as implementation level; researchers from universities and research organisations as beneficiaries.

Budget and Funding: For the funding of the multilateral projects, budget initially available for bilateral funding has been repurposed. Some countries have made available extra budget for the calls.

Further information: Published on the different websites of the funding agencies once opened. For example, in Austria: Scientific & Technological Cooperation (S&T Cooperation) | OeAD, Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation; <https://oead.at/en/cooperations/international-he-cooperations/scientific-technological-cooperation-st-cooperation> or in Slovakia: Grant Schemes | Multilateral Calls | The Slovak Research and Development Agency; <https://www.apvv.sk/grantove-schemy/multilaterálne-výzvy/archiv/dunajská-stratégia-2016.html>

Contact:

- AT: Mr Christian Gollubits, Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, christian.gollubits@bmbwf.gv.at

- SK: Mr Marcel Sládok, Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, marcel.sladok@minedu.sk
- CZ: Mr Luděk Kos, Ministry of Education Youth and Sports, ludek.kos@msmt.ctz
- RS: Ms Snežana Omić, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, snezana.omic@mpn.gov.rs
- FR: Mr François-Xavier Mortreuil, Embassy of France in Slovakia, francois-xavier.mortreuil@diplomatie.gouv.fr
- MN: Ms Ivana Lagator, Ministry of Education, Science and Innovation of Montenegro, ivana.lagator@mpni.gov.me
- BG: Mr Yuri Kalvachev, Bulgarian Science Fund, kalvachev@mon.bg

Western Balkans R&I Information Hub

Project, network, platform; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 7 Knowledge Society

A newly-launched (March 2022) Horizon Europe funded project, called POLICY ANSWERS, will deploy a vast array of tools – from high-level meetings to information services, from launching pilot activities to policy recommendations on key innovation issues – to support a better integration of the Western Balkans into the European Research Area (ERA).



The project aims to continue and scale up the common efforts of the European Union and the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo¹, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – for cooperation on Innovation, Research, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. The goal is to ultimately foster stability and prosperity while strengthening the European perspective of the Region.

The focus on the Western Balkans allows for a contribution both to the EUSAIR as well as EUSDR (as foreseen in the project plan).

Led by the Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI) in Vienna and involving 14 partner institutions, the project builds on the solid ground created by successful past experiences, including WBC-INCO.NET and Danube-INCO.NET. From the Danube Region, the following countries are represented in the project: Austria, Croatia, Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia.

In the past years, the Western Balkans Steering Platforms (WB SPs) for Research & Innovation and Education & Training have played a central role in stimulating, monitoring and supporting the cooperation in research, education and innovation between the European Union Member States, the European Commission and the Western Balkans in EU funded programmes and beyond. Regular platform meetings, including at Ministerial level, have brought together a multitude of stakeholders to identify common priorities, discuss latest policy and reforming measures, decide on spin-off activities and follow-up measures as well as on topics for regional cooperation with EU assistance.

Past efforts supported by the EU have also built widely-used information hubs and services: from websites and social media to monthly newsletters, which provide high quality targeted information on research, technology and innovation in, with and for the Western Balkans but also touching upon education, culture, youth and sports.

Objectives: The project will run until February 2026 and focus, among many things, on the following activities:

- Organising policy dialogue events such as Ministerial and Steering Platform meetings and ad-hoc policy coordination meetings, offering room for exchange about policy implementation.

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on Kosovo Declaration of Independence

- Supplying an information hub and web platform, www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu, addressing R&I, Education, Culture, Youth and Sport in the Western Balkans to enable better information sharing, create opportunities for joint actions and get the WB closer to EU policy making.
- Carrying out analytical activities such as mapping of relevant institutions, programmes, initiatives, needs and common priorities in the Western Balkans, and monitoring ongoing activities related to the implementation of the WB Agenda
- Designing informed policy recommendations to decision makers in the Region, addressing the EU's key priorities such as: digitalisation, green economy and health, and aligning them.
- Implementing regional pilot activities which reach out directly to academia, industry and civil society, in order to strengthen links between academia and industry in the WB region, and to support mobility of researchers within the area. Targeted actions will also be taken to increase the visibility of Western Balkans research infrastructures in the wider European research landscape.

At all stages of the project, special emphasis will be put on the inclusion of so-far underrepresented groups and the coordination with key stakeholders and international organisations.

With its ambitious and wide-ranging work programme, POLICY ANSWERS will have an impact on science, economy and society, thus contributing to a faster recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and to the digital and green transitions in the Western Balkans.

POLICY ANSWERS will support policy makers, researchers, students, innovators, entrepreneurs, underrepresented groups and therefore improve the framework conditions for building the knowledge society, especially in the non-EU countries of the Danube Region. The project activities contribute to the PA7 actions and targets with its strong focus on the following: policy dialogue in the R&I field, stakeholder mapping, capacity building in accordance with the identified national needs, supporting academia-industry links, improving mobility of researchers and youth, supporting open access to research infrastructure, education in the field of R&I, aligning priorities in the fields of Digital Transformation and Green Agenda.

POLICY ANSWERS will also contribute to the competitiveness of enterprises (PA 8) with its policy dialogue and policy briefs related to innovation and with regional grant scheme for supporting academia-industry links.

Finally, the project activities are in line with PA 10 in terms of supporting better coordination of funding (via policy dialogue) and strengthening institutional capacities (via capacity building activities).

Need and (expected) impact:

Policy coordination in the knowledge area is needed.

A call was launched by the European Commission and a consortium successfully applied for the funding. The background of the call is the enlargement policy and association of the Western Balkans to Horizon Europe and inclusion to the European Research Area, Higher Education Area etc.

The project implements an exchange platform similar to the previous Danube-INCO.NET mentioned under Action 1 of PA 7 in the EUSDR Action Plan.

Other relevant aspects for the EUSDR:

- Coordination of activities between WB and EU Member States, e.g. via organisation of Steering Platform meetings
- Funding coordination via pilot activities, e.g. joint regional vouchers
- Sharing of information in relation to available funding, in particular Horizon Europe, EUREKA, COST, etc.
- Strengthening of cooperation across EUSDR Priority Areas (digitalisation, European Green Deal/green agenda, healthy societies)
- Increasing awareness about R&I from the target countries (partially overlapping with the Danube Region)
- Organising of activities (including a conference) bringing together business and academia
- Cooperating with stakeholders including clusters, DiH, etc.

Macro-regional dimension:

From the Danube Region, the following countries are represented in the project: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Germany, Montenegro, Serbia

Beyond the Danube Region, the following countries are represented in the project: Italy, Albania, Kosovo², North Macedonia

Generally, the project aims to involve other EU Member States and promote the Western Balkans in the EU.

Stakeholders involved: The Project Advisory Board includes several partners from the European Commission (including DG RTD, DG JRC, DG GROW, DG REGIO, DG CNCT, DG NEAR, etc.) as well as the Regional Cooperation Council.

The project supports the organisation of Steering Platform meetings which includes several stakeholders including e.g. COST, EUREKA, CEI, Berlin Process, etc.

Budget and Funding: Estimated budget: EUR 4 993 108,75

Further information: www.westernbalkans-infohub.eu (currently still forwarded to www.wbc-rti.info on which the project builds upon)

Contact:

Ms Elke Dall, Centre for Social Innovation, dall@zsi.at, policy-answers@westernbalkans-infohub.eu

Other: The project ecosystem aims to mobilise and coordinate broader networks, act as a true info hub or respectively build a network of networks. Cooperation with EUSDR actors is therefore highly appreciated.

² This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on Kosovo Declaration of Independence



POLICY ANSWERS

R&I POLICY making, implementation AND Support in the WEsteRn BalkanS

DECIDE: Danube Region Programme Digital Services for Circular Economy – a Toolbox for Regional Developers and SME (new)

Project; ongoing

Interreg
Danube RegionCo-funded by
the European Union

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises

Make sustainable products the norm in the EU; focus on the sectors that use most resources and where the potential for circularity is high, including batteries and vehicles, packaging, textiles, plastics, ICT, construction and buildings, food, water and nutrients; ensure less waste; make circularity work for people, regions and cities. The development and implementation of CEBM meets common obstacles in the Danube Region such as local regulations contrary to the circular concept, lack of infrastructure for waste treatment, lack of recycling technology and especially a lack of adequately planned business models. This is where the project aims to intervene by providing methods and tools to SMEs.

Objectives: Enhancing innovation and technology transfer in Danube Region

The main goal of the project is the identification and implementation of successful circular economy business models within the Danube Region, the application of innovative tools and methods to contribute to the goals of sustainable development in the EU. Examples of good practice for circular economy business models in the areas of food, textiles, packaging and batteries were identified, but smart cities within the Danube Region were also recognised. These success models include appropriate tools and methods and the training of relevant actors with appropriate training that will be further transferred to transnational potentials.

Need and (expected) impact: Circular Economy Business Models (CEBM) are vital responses to future challenges, as seen in EU Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Fit for 55 climate policies, and the EU Circular Economy Action Plan of March 2020. They aim to reduce CO₂ emissions to 55% of 1990 levels by 2030, with national adaptation starting in 2023. CEBM modify value chains to improve product longevity, reuse, refinement, or material recycling sustainably. Regional action is key to success, reducing CO₂ footprints and leveraging available technologies. However, dependence on national policies makes CEBM complex yet offers opportunities for transnational cooperation. In the Danube Region, fragmented geography and diverse regulations pose challenges but also foster innovation. Smaller countries like Slovenia and Croatia have doubled their Circular Economy activities and recycling rates in the past decade, contrasting with stagnation in highly industrialised northern Danube Region countries. Despite varying levels of Circular Economy maturity, opportunities for knowledge exchange exist within the Region. The DECIDE initiative aims to systematically survey, catalogue, and evaluate successful CEBM in the Danube Region, facilitating know-how transfer and leveraging digital tools for interlinking SMEs to Circular Economy Value Chain Networks. This aligns with PA 8 Strategic Frame objectives, focusing on establishing transnational digital value chains and fostering AI applications. The initiative dovetails with EUSDR Workplan objectives, particularly related to RDI activities, technology transfer, and circular economy policies.

Macro-regional dimension: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia

Stakeholders involved:

Project partners:

- Centre for Digitalisation Böblingen District – ZD.BB GmbH, Business support organisation, Germany
- Reutlingen University, Herman-Hollerith-Center, Higher education and research organisation, Germany
- University of Zagreb, Faculty of Organisation and Informatics, Higher education and research organisation, Croatia
- Technology Innovation Centre Međimurje Ltd., Regional public authority, Croatia
- University of Maribor, Higher education and research organisation, Slovenia
- Pulp and Paper Institute, SME, Slovenia
- ANTEJA ECG D.O.O., Infrastructure and (public) service provider, Slovenia
- Sofia University, Science and Research Department Higher education and research organisation, Bulgaria
- Ompipack First Hungarian Packaging Technology Cluster, SME, Hungary
- University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology G.E.Palade of Targu Mures, Higher education and research organisation, Romania
- Alumni Association of Petru Maior University; Interest groups incl. NGOs, Romania
- Innovation Salzburg GmbH, Sectoral agency, Austria
- Social cooperative Humana Nova, Interest groups incl. NGOs, Croatia
- Alecu Russo Balti State University, Higher education and research organisation, Republic of Moldova
- Regional agency for the development of small & medium size enterprises Alma Mons Ltd. Novi Sad, Business support organisation, Serbia
- Sarajevo Economic Region Development Agency, Sectoral agency, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Associated partners:

- ICEBERG Plus SRL, Romania
- Chamber of Commerce and Industry Mures, Romania
- REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY CENTRU, Romania
- EDIH Adria, Croatia
- District Office Böblingen, Germany
- Baden-Württemberg Stiftung, Germany
- Innova Észak-Alföld Regional Development and Innovation Agency, Hungary
- Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia (CCIS), Serbia

Budget and Funding:

Total budget: EUR 2 886 750,05

Interreg funds: EUR 2 309 400,02

Further information: <https://www.zd-bb.de/>

Contact: Mr Dr. Claus Hoffmann, ZD.BB, Managing Director, hoffmann@zd-bb.de, +49 7031 3048102



PLAN C: Moving Plastics and Machine Industry towards Circularity *(new)*

Interreg
Danube RegionCo-funded by
the European Union*Project; ongoing*

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises

The Plan-C project consortium of 14 partners from DE, AT, CZ, SK, HU, RS, BA, RO, and MD aims to boost the transformation of the plastics value chain in the Danube Region towards circularity through the transnational cooperation of plastics processors/producers and the machine industry. Close cooperation among partners across the Danube Region countries is required to introduce a fundamental change in this complex plastics value chain, implying a radical shift of mindsets, behaviour, and business paradigms.

Objectives: Based on a transnational technology transfer and utilising a design thinking process, the PPs + plastics producers co-create and immediately demonstrate circular plastics prototypes. The resulting Circular Plastics Guideline will aim at building up knowledge and capacities for its practical implementation in regional companies.

PPs and machine firms will analyse, ideate, and prototype circular solutions for each machine life cycle phase and create related digital business models along the whole machine life cycle, summarised in a Guideline for circularity in the machine industry.

These above described two objectives aim at fostering cooperation and exchange of knowledge between SMEs, clusters and academia (Action 1, Target 3 in EUSDR Action Plan). Further, the development of circular business models exploits digitalised processes in SME and through the piloting in both objectives the innovation ecosystem in the Danube Region is established or enriched (Action 2 in EUSDR Action Plan).

The third objective is the creation of a related Transnational Action plan for boosting circularity in the entire plastics value chain (plastics producers + machine industry), based on the latest EU regulations and in close cooperation with the regional policy level in each partner country. This will ensure transfer to the RIS3 of the partner countries with intensified awareness raising and proposing new support measures for local SMEs (Action 3 in EUSDR Action Plan).

Need and (expected) impact: Plastics represent a high-performance material that is omnipresent in modern life, but by far not sufficiently recirculated after first use. The goals of the EU circular economy package, i.e., a recycling quote of plastics packaging of 50% until 2025, remain challenging, even for the forerunner Danube Region countries; additional EU regulations within the Green Deal have recently been issued and further ones are expected to come. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to support SME to proactively transform their product development, the product life cycle management and to create related business models in line with the idea of a circular economy.

Equally important is to anchor this goal on a strategic level with strongly involving the policy level.

The uptake of the Guidelines for a circular plastics industry will result in increased capacities in SMEs and new/intensified cooperation between SMEs, clusters, and academia. The close collaboration with

the policy level, e.g., through the involvement of the associated strategic partners, enables the uptake of project results in RIS3.

Macro-regional dimension: The project has a clear macro-regional dimension and a multi-level governance approach. It contributes to specific actions and targets of the PA 8 as defined in the EUSDR Action Plan.

Within the Plan-C project, 14 partners from DE, AT, CZ, SK, HU, RS, BA, RO, and MD collaborate with 10 ASPs who represent the policy/strategic level in above-mentioned Danube Region countries.

Throughout the implementation of this project, the main actors in the value chain – plastics producers and machine firms - increase their competitiveness, which contributes to the achievement of the EUSDR PA 8 goals.

It is expected that the project results will not only have an impact on the participating regions, but also on the entire partner countries and, through intense dissemination activities, also on neighbouring countries, e.g. Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro. Further, the project will also be promoted by the following PA 8 Working Group (WG) members:

The PP Clustero (Mr Daniel Cosnita) is a member of the WG – Clusters and Regional Development, LP Business Upper Austria and PP aws – Austria Wirtschaftsservice, and the ASP Pforzheim University are members of the WG Artificial Intelligence.

Stakeholders involved: Public institutions, regional agencies, chambers of commerce, universities, institutes, clusters, competence centres, business centres etc.

LP:

- Business Upper Austria – OÖ Wirtschaftsagentur (involved departments: Plastics & Mechatronics Cluster, Policy dept. for Upper Austrian Economic Strategy), Austria

PP:

- aws - Austria Wirtschaftsservice, Austria
- Technology Center Horb, Germany
- Plastr - Czech Plastics Cluster, Czechia
- Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Czechia
- SPK -Slovak Plastic Cluster, Slovakia
- TUKE - Technical University of Košice, Faculty of Manufacturing Technologies with a seat in Prešov, Slovakia
- Omnipack - First Hungarian Packaging Technology Cluster, Hungary
- Innovation Center of the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (Univ. Belgrade), Serbia
- CLUSTERO - Romanian Cluster Association, Romania
- "Petru Poni" Institute of Macromolecular Chemistry, Romania
- Innoskart Business Development Nonprofit Kft., Hungary
- FITT - Foundation for Innovation, Technology and Knowledge Transfer, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Sorintex - Association of Light industry enterprises. Republic of Moldova

ASP:

- Circular Economy Forum Austria, Austria
- Austrian Federal Ministry Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology, Austria
- Pforzheim University, Germany
- Regional Economic Development Agency of Northern Black Forest, Germany
- Prime Minister's Office, Managing Authority of Economic Development Programmes, Hungary
- INNOVA Észak-Alföld Regional Development and Innovation Agency Nonprofit, Hungary
- Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia, Serbia
- Technology Innovation Centre, Czechia
- National Cluster Association, Czechia
- Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Trenčín Regional Chamber, Slovakia
- Ministry of Economy Romania, Romania

Budget and Funding:

Total Interreg Funds: EUR 1 735 600

Total Eligible Budget: EUR 2 169 500

Further information:

- <https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/plan-c>
- <https://www.linkedin.com/company/plan-c-moving-plastics-and-machine-industry-towards-circularity/>

Contact: Ms DI Eva Breuer, Business Upper Austria – OÖ Wirtschaftsagentur GmbH (Mechatronics Cluster), eva.breuer@biz-up.at, +43-664-8481291



WE.Circular: Boosting digital and industrial capacity for sustainable circular transition of women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region
(new)

Interreg
Danube RegionCo-funded by
the European Union

Project; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises

WE.Circular comes as a response of the specific needs of women entrepreneurs (WE) in the Danube Region through project transnational activities focused on: identification of needs and challenges WE face in their digital and CE transition; exchange of knowledge; CE policy measures in the Danube Region, policy improvement and S3s harmonisation through developed Transnational Strategy for WE Circular Transition; innovative training programme for development and improvement of digital and CE culture and skills delivered by Learning Network; innovative circular business models for recycling, reuse, and reduce developed and tested by WE.Circular Labs which will also facilitate increase of skills of stakeholders to harmonise S3s; capacity building of the public authorities regarding assessment of innovative circular business model and, design of a supportive WE policy framework via Transnational Policy Learning Centre.

Objectives: The main objective of the WE.Circular project is to address a very important challenge – to increase the digital and business skills of women entrepreneurs for the industry transition and to provide key stakeholders with the skills needed to develop and implement smart specialisation strategies, preparing female entrepreneurs from the Danube Region for the transition to Industry 4.0, while fulfilling aspects of the circular economy.

Need and (expected) impact: WE.Circular results will have a strong economic and green impact.

Macro-regional dimension: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia

Stakeholders involved:

- Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovations – Varna, Bulgaria
- VFU Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar”, Bulgaria
- IRS Innovation Region Styria LTD, Austria
- Technology Park Varaždin ltd, Croatia
- IREAS, Institute for Structural Policy, o.p. s., Czechia
- Bwcon GmbH, Germany
- Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Štajerska, Slovenia
- Pannon Business Network Association, Hungary
- Hungarian Economic Development Agency Public Benefit Non-profit Limited Company, Hungary
- Ropot Boutique SRL, Romania
- Slovak Business Agency, Slovakia
- Organisation for Entrepreneurship Development, Republic of Moldova
- Foreign Trade Chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina

- University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Association of Business Women in Serbia

Budget and Funding: Interreg Funds: EUR 2 399 262,97

Further information: Ms Dr. Ralitsa Zhekova office@rapiv.org, +359 52 383 700, +359889315771,
Professor Asen Zlatarov 6 Varna 9007



Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence *(new)*

Platform; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 9 People & Skills

The Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence serves as a forum for policy and practice exchange on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) with a thematic focus on going green and social inclusion. The platform was launched in 2021 by EUSDR Priority Area 9 in cooperation with the European Training Foundation (ETF) Network for Excellence (ENE).

As part of the initiative, a Policy Platform was established, promoting exchange and cooperation among core stakeholders from responsible national institutions from Danube Region countries and experts from the European Commission, PA 9 and ETF. The Danube Region Platform also promotes the development of transnational CoVEs-projects in the Danube Region.

Objectives: The objectives of the platform are:

- To facilitate knowledge exchange and promote cooperation on VET excellence among policy makers, VET providers, and transnational experts
- To promote the establishment of Centres of Vocational Excellence in the Danube Region.

The platform will contribute to the actions 5 and 6, by promoting the establishment of “centres of vocational excellence” and by strengthening regional cooperation to facilitate networking of relevant stakeholders.

Need and (expected) impact: In the EUSDR Action Plan, adopted by the European Commission in April 2020, “promoting the establishment of ‘centres of vocational excellence’” is named under Action 6 as an important goal of PA 9. In this context, the Action Plan refers to the function of CoVEs as “catalysts for local business investment, supporting local innovation and smart specialisation strategies by ensuring supply of high-quality skilled workers through flexible and timely offer of training”.

Implementing vocational excellence approaches features prominently in the overall EU policy agenda for skills and for Vocational Education and Training (VET). CoVEs are considered being a relevant instrument for meeting the needs of an innovative, inclusive and sustainable economy, supporting the green transition and the EU Green Deal, the European Skills Agenda, the European Education Area, the 2020 Council Recommendation on VET, as well as the Osnabrück Declaration.

The Policy Platform promotes dialogue on approaches to VET excellence and current developments regarding CoVEs in the Danube Region. Experts from the European Commission, PA 9 and ETF contribute to the discussions and share information on developments on a national, regional and international level and opportunities for cooperation and financial support, e.g. in the framework of the ETF Network for Excellence, Erasmus+ or other relevant instruments. Best practice examples in the form of project presentations from CoVEs at platform meetings further support mutual learning and cooperation.

Macro-regional dimension: As of May 2024, the following 13 Danube Region countries have agreed to participate in the platform: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

Stakeholders involved: Stakeholders from educational institutions, representatives from already established CoVEs, representatives of responsible national administrations/institutions, and experts from the European Commission, PA 9 and ETF.

Budget and Funding: The policy platform is facilitated via the PAC project in cooperation with ETF. Potential spin-off activities (the foreseen CoVE) could apply for Erasmus+ CoVE calls or other funding sources to finance project activities.

Further information: <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/coves-platform/>

Contact: Mr Jürgen Schick, PAC PA 9, juergen.schick@bmbwf.gv.at

Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)

Platform; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 9 People & Skills

The Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) is a regional organisation enhancing and facilitating regional cooperation in the area of education and training. It is mandated by the ministries in charge of education from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Republic of Moldova.

Objectives: Regional cooperation in the areas of:

- Modernisation of vocational education and training (VET), enhancing cooperation with the business sector and contributing to the quality and efficiency of education and training systems, including focus on green skills and renewable energy
- Cooperation in the higher education system, contributing to the facilitation of recognition of qualifications and enhancements of quality assurance mechanisms
- Cooperation in the area of pre-tertiary education, contributing to greater quality of external evaluation and digitalisation of teaching and teacher education and training

Need and (expected) impact: Lack of labour-market relevance of VET is targeted by enhancing cooperation between the education and business sector and through the development of regionally-based occupational and qualification standards, leading to greater employability and mobility opportunities for young people, as well as contributing to the green transition.

Obstacles in the recognition of higher education qualifications are targeted by enhancing cooperation between centres in charge of the recognition of qualifications, leading to a faster recognition process, facilitating the employability and continuation of education across the region.

Quality of pre-tertiary education is enhanced by developing regional standards for external evaluators' competences, peer learning and trainings.

Macro-regional dimension: The processes include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo³, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, of which Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova and Serbia are Danube Region countries.

Stakeholders involved:

- Ministries of education
- Agencies for vocational education and training
- Qualification agencies
- Teacher training agencies
- Agencies for quality assurance in pre-tertiary education
- Agencies for quality assurance in tertiary education
- Chambers of commerce

³ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on Kosovo Declaration of Independence

- International organisations

Budget and Funding: Member countries (ministries of education), OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation, Austrian Development Agency, GIZ – German Agency for International Development.

Further information: www.erisee.org

Contact: Ms Tina Šarić, ERI SEE Secretariat, tina.saric@erisee.org

EUSDR ESF Network *(new)*

Network; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 9 People & Skills, PA 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation

The ESF Network of the EUSDR was established following the Meeting of Ministers in charge of EU funds at the margins of the EUSDR Annual Forum in Ulm, DE, in 2015. The Network constitutes a platform of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region to facilitate the exchange and the coordination between the Managing Authorities, the respective EUSDR Priority Areas and the European Commission as well as further relevant stakeholders. From 2024, also the future Managing Authorities of the Candidate Countries are part of the network. It aims at fostering transnational cooperation in the Danube Region, to thereby connect cooperation and investment, and serve as a joint knowledge hub for implementation, planning and exchange of experience with social policies.

The EUSDR ESF Network is chaired and organised by PAC 9 “People and Skills” and PAC 10 “Institutional Capacity & Cooperation” together with the network partners.

Objectives: The ESF-Network embeds the targets of the EUSDR into the ESF OPs and supports the accession process of candidate countries to foster transnational cooperation in the Danube Region. The network aims at:

- Developing a common understanding of the role of the EUSDR in relation to the ESF+/IPA;
- Consolidating the network: Enhancing Know-how-transfer and co-designing of a state of the art of social innovation; capitalising on and disseminating good practice out of project results and experiences;
- Managing transnational cooperation: Building a viable programme framework to manage transnational cooperation.

Need and (expected) impact: The ESF Network is of highest relevance for the EUSDR and the Danube Region as a whole, as it enables the alignment of funding towards the Strategy, and, by embedding transnational elements into the OPs, combines cooperation and investment as well as to support the accession process of the involved candidate countries. Moreover, the network is implemented in cooperation with EUSDR PA 10.

Macro-regional dimension: Till 2023, only the nine EU member states participated in the ESF MA network. From 2024, we started to enlarge the network to the candidate countries to enforce the capacity building in the field of social/employment policies between EU member states and candidate countries.

Stakeholders involved: Representatives of ESF Managing Authorities, IPA Managing Authorities, line ministries, European Commission (DG EMPL and DG REGIO), CSO & NGOs.

Budget and Funding: The network is enabled via the PAC project/Interreg Danube Region Programme.

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

Contact:

- Mr Jörg Mirtl, Ministry for Labour and Economy, Austria, joerg.mirtl@bmaw.gv.at
- Ms Barbara Willsberger, L&R Social Research, willsberger@lrsocialresearch.at

Cross-border Emergency Healthcare

Process, initiative; ongoing

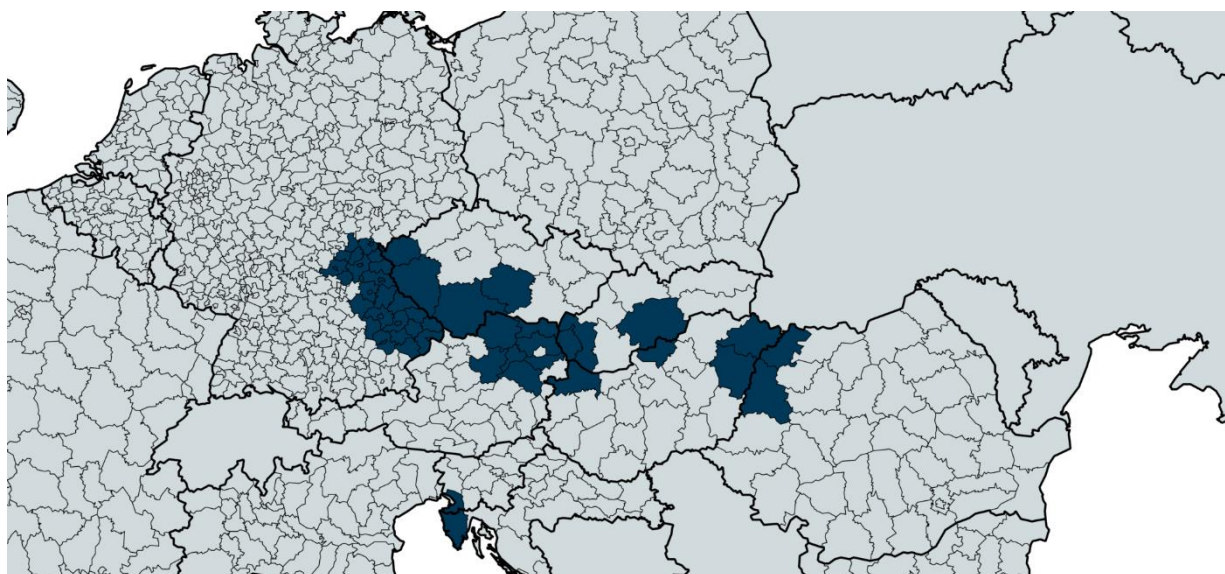
EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation

Smooth cross-border emergency healthcare is a major contribution to better quality of life, in particular for people living in border regions. Thus, this initiative reconciles legal, administrative, technical and cultural aspects of cross-border cooperation. In doing so, the initiative benefits from a strong political will and dedicated partners.

Objectives: The aim of the initiative is to enhance cross-border patient care and medical services. Specifically, it also aims at expanding inpatient treatment, test feasibility of sharing medical services and promote knowledge sharing among healthcare specialists as well as planning and implementing cross-border health centres. Despite emergency healthcare not being as widespread as it should be, there are some initial and successful initiatives in place. The project “Healthacross for future” between Austria and the Czechia is a good practice example to learn a lot from. By providing such good practice examples this initiative benefitted from a strong political will and dedicated partners.

Need and (expected) impact: In the context of the Danube Region Strategy, it is essential to address the significance of cross-border emergency situations and the trust required in people and services. Additionally, effective cross-border cooperation must overcome language barriers, considering that healthcare is a sensitive domain with confidential data. In the realm of cross-border emergency healthcare, harmonising or reconciling administrative procedures, equipment and communication systems becomes imperative, all issues which are addressed within this initiative.

Macro-regional dimension: AT, CZ, HU, SK, RO, DE; expected impact on all Danube Region countries



Stakeholders involved: PA 10, Danube Region Hospitals and Healthcare providers, ministries responsible for healthcare, cities in cross-border regions

Budget and Funding: Interreg cross-border Programmes, Danube Region Programme Seed Money Facility

Further information: <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/cross-border-emergency-healthcare-in-the-danube-region/>

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Mothers for Ecology and Peace *(new)*

Project; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation

The project supports and empowers refugee women, mothers and their families from Ukraine and communities in bordering countries. With a focus on a trauma-sensitive approach, the foreseen activities are based on three pillars:

1. exchange and network building,
2. capacity building and empowerment,
3. development of Mother Centre initiatives in Ukraine as a “safe space” for informal learning and democracy building.

Objectives: The project aims to facilitate dialogue (e. g. round tables) between Mother Centres in the Danube Region, local authorities and the economy, and offers training in leadership skills and self-management to individuals. Roma women with refugee background are explicitly involved. Also, ecological awareness-raising will play an important role.

As part of the project, Mother Centre initiatives from Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czechia as bordering countries to Ukraine have the possibility to receive seed funding for their activities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a joint workshop on peace work in post-war countries will be conducted.

Need and (expected) impact: The project addresses the identified need to support and empower refugee women, mothers, and families from Ukraine and neighbouring border communities. With a focus on trauma-sensitive approaches, it aims to provide essential assistance and resources to those facing unique challenges in their displacement.

Through the three pillars, the project facilitates dialogues, fosters community collaboration and promotes socio-economic empowerment. By engaging local authorities and marginalised groups like Roma women, it creates a pathway for inclusive development and cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, its emphasis on ecological awareness and peace-building efforts further contributes to sustainable and harmonious communities.

Macro-regional dimension: The project’s network is comprised by Mother Center initiatives from Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, Bulgaria, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Czechia, Hungary, Slovenia and Slovakia. The consortium is open for further initiatives from other countries.

Stakeholders involved: State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg, Mother centres in the EUSDR, local authorities, general public.

Budget and Funding: The project is co-financed by the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg.

Further information: Not on a website yet, follow up of

https://minemothercenters.org/ukraine/?et_fb=1&PageSpeed=off

Contact: Ms Andrea Laux, Chair of Board, Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment e.V., andrea@andrealaux.de

National Participation Day *(new)*

Platform; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation

The National Participation Days provide a platform for representatives from public authorities and civil society organisations to develop ways of cooperation. In doing so, the Participation Days offer a unique opportunity to align projects and initiatives with EUSDR's objectives and actions.



Objectives: The Participation Day format is expected to foster exchange between state and non-state actors about (the implementation of) the EUSDR. By engaging in a regular exchange, the format facilitates trust-building and capacity building for all involved stakeholders.

Need and (expected) impact: National and Regional Participation Days, also known as National Hearings, are crucial for aligning strategic objectives with tangible collaborative approaches. Through these platforms, representatives from EUSDR, public authorities, and civil society organisations can chart the course for impactful development in the Danube Region.

By encouraging the regular organisation of National Participation Days, we aim to empower national and regional representatives from public authorities and civil society organisations to drive collaborative efforts effectively.

PA 10, along with the Danube Civil Society Forum, stands steady to offer guidance and insights upon request, assisting in the organisation of participative events that address the Danube Strategy comprehensively.

Macro-regional dimension: The Danube Participation Days are a side event of the EUSDR Annual Forum and address stakeholders from all 14 participating countries of the EUSDR. Likewise, the National Participation Days are supposed to be organised in all Danube Region countries on a regular basis. So far, 80% of Danube Region countries have held at least one National Participation Day (Austria, Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine).

Stakeholders involved: Danube Civil Society Forum, PA 10, NGOs in the Danube Regions; NCs and PA 10 Steering Group members, national, regional and local authorities from EUSDR Members.

Budget and Funding: The National Participation Days in the EUSDR are typically funded by the national government of the countries involved in the Danube Region, EU funds designated for regional development, international organisations and sometimes private sector sponsors or partners. The funding depends on the specific activities planned for each National Participation Day and the priorities set by the participating countries.

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

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Follow-up EUSDR Workshop on the “Impact of the war in Ukraine on Arms Trafficking and other Security Threats” *(new)*

Project; ongoing

EUSDR Priority Area(s): PA 11 Security

In 2023, an OSINT report from the GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL AND ORGANIZED CRIME on the effects of the Russian war against Ukraine was published. The content of this report highlighted current and potential future flows of illicitly traded weapon. A first workshop by law enforcement agencies (LEAs) from around Europe on the topic in April 2024 has identified 14 recommendations on how to improve the fight against illicit firearms arms trafficking. In the next step, the applicants aim to build on these recommendations and to conduct an in-depth workshop to facilitate their implementation.

Objectives:

- Strengthen international networks on fighting terrorism and illicit trafficking of firearms
- Exchange on recent, past and/or ongoing related investigations
- Share gathered intelligence on groups involved in smuggling activities, their structure and smuggling routes
- Provide an overview of the status quo in international police cooperation in the field of terrorism and weapon smuggling
- Discuss prevention strategies and lessons learned from prior conflicts

Need and (expected) impact: The illicit firearms trafficking is a global phenomenon which cannot be addressed by one country alone. And the war against Ukraine is providing an additional source of weapons and vast opportunities for organised crime to benefit from.

A regional approach bringing together all countries from the Danube Region on one or more of the outlined recommendations of the first workshop can contribute to making the Danube Region safer through better cooperation, a more efficient information exchange and through the exchange of ideas and strategies that have proven to work.

Macro-regional dimension: A macro-regional dimension is given since the future flow of weapons from Ukraine to the rest of Europe will affect both the neighbouring countries (Poland, Slovakia, Republic of Moldova, Hungary and Romania) and the rest of Europe. Europe has experienced this phenomenon during and after the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, there are many avenues for cooperation.

First, the already established cooperation with the colleagues from Ukraine is essential in supporting measures to better register and detect weapons. Second, the co-organisation with the Austrian colleagues from the first workshop will be built upon and the inclusion of as many neighbouring countries as possible will be sought to maximise the impact.

Thus, we can say that this initiative will go beyond the Danube Region and will touch upon the territories of other MRS.

Stakeholders involved:

- Munich Police Department as the organiser
- Co-organising countries (e.g., Ukraine, Austria and other interested partners)
- EUROPOL and European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT) Firearms
- NGOs for research input (e.g., the Global Initiative) as well as for strategic support (e.g., SEESAC)

Budget and Funding: The Project is funded by the Danube Region Programme and was co-financed by the Austrian Ministry of the Interior for the workshop in April 2024.

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