



EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Needs Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs)



Imprint:

This publication illustrates a Needs Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs).

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All	<i>Adriatic Ionian Initiative</i>
CESEC	<i>Central and South Eastern Europe Gas Connectivity</i>
CoR	<i>Committee of the Regions</i>
DG	<i>Directorate-General</i>
DG ENV	<i>Directorate-General for Environment</i>
DG MOVE	<i>Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport</i>
DG REGIO	<i>Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy</i>
DMWG	<i>Disaster Management Working Group</i>
DSP	<i>Danube Strategy Point</i>
DTP	<i>Danube Transnational Programme</i>
EC	<i>European Commission</i>
EESC	<i>European Economic and Social Committee</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
EUBAM	<i>European Union Border Assistance Mission to Moldova and Ukraine</i>
EUSAIR	<i>EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region</i>
EUSALP	<i>EU Strategy for the Alpine Region</i>
EUSBSR	<i>EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region</i>
EUSDR	<i>EU Strategy for the Danube Region</i>
HLG	<i>High-Level Group</i>
ICPDR	<i>International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River</i>
ICT	<i>information and communications technology</i>
MLG	<i>multilevel governance</i>
MRS	<i>macro-regional Strategy</i>
MS	<i>member states</i>
NC	<i>National Coordinator</i>
NGO	<i>Non-Governmental Organisation</i>
PA	<i>Priority Area</i>
PAC	<i>Priority Area Coordinator</i>
RCC	<i>Regional Cooperation Council</i>
RoP	<i>Rules of Procedures</i>
SELEC	<i>Southeast European Law Enforcement Center</i>
TEN-T	<i>Trans-European Transport Network</i>
WG	<i>Working Group</i>

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Introduction

The *EUSDR Need Assessment on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs)*¹ provides a comprehensive overview of the organisation and functioning of the Steering Groups and aims to clarify the representation in the SGs and enhance the participation of stakeholders groups from the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) participating states in the activities developed within the Priority Areas² (PAs).

Aiming to support evidence-based decision making within the EUSDR and to strengthen the coordination among EUSDR stakeholders, the current paper consists of five chapters, as following:

- *Sources, Groundwork and Governance Structure of the EUSDR Steering Groups* describes the developments in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region as regards the SGs, their organisation and role and responsibilities within the Priority Areas;
- *Factors influencing the participation in Steering Groups: findings across the EUSDR* presents elements that influence and lead to the stakeholder engagement according to thematic fields;
- *Comparative perspective: determinations and possible approaches* offers examples of lessons learned and best practices depicted from the experience of EUSDR Priority Areas and further provides information on similar structures from the other macro-regional strategies;
- *Conclusion* reflects on the operational, functional and executive aspects that lead to ensuring increased ownership and engaging the necessary resources for successful EUSDR implementation.

The annexes (Annex I. Template of Steering Group member lists, Annex II. Overview of Priority Area Rules of Procedure (RoP), Annex III. Executive aspects of organising Steering Group meetings and Annex IV Improving capacities and participation (online survey)) represent possible additional tools envisaging to support the development of future activities within the PAs.

The *EUSDR Needs Assessment on the engagement in the Steering Groups* addresses mainly Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) and National Coordinators (NCs), but could assist other stakeholder groups in further developing activities towards involvement in the EUSDR and its implementation. The *EUSDR Needs Assessment on the engagement in the Steering Groups* further aims to collect and present in a comprehensive manner up-to-date information that facilitates knowledge exchange and disseminates best practice examples and solutions for tackling the issue of attendance in the SG meetings.

By showcasing successful approaches throughout PAs, EUSDR stakeholders and beyond, the *EUSDR Needs Assessment on the engagement in the Steering Groups* aims to provide best-case examples for planning of future activities and offer support to increase the participation of the EUSDR member states in the SGs. It is certainly up to the core stakeholder (PACs and NCs) to decide whether, how and to what extent the provided information might be relevant and useful in their daily work.

¹ The Needs Assessment was elaborated by Danube Strategy Point and represents a deliverable of the Danube Strategy Point – A Secretariat for the Danube Region, financed by Interreg Danube Transnational Programme (DTP). It was developed under the activity focused on providing support for the National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) in organising Steering Group (SG) meetings/workshops/seminars (deliverable D.M.2.1). The report aims at supporting the PACs and NCs in improving their capacities as well as enhancing participation of the EUSDR participating states in the activities of the Priority Areas (PAs).

² Metis (2019): Evaluation of the effectiveness, communication and stakeholder involvement of the EUSDR: 27. [Online](#).

1. Sources and Groundwork

In order to identify the main challenges and possible solutions for enhancing the participation of the SG members in the activities and processes generated at PA level, a number of reports and official documents relevant in the macro-regional context have been considered.

Thus, the *Rules of Procedure of the Steering Groups (RoP)/Guidelines for the Functioning of the Steering Group/Terms of Reference* represented a valuable information source. The current report briefly presents the main provisions, highlights similarities and differences - in the structure, composition and modus operandi of the SGs of the EUSDR PAs. In addition, a comparative overview of their provisions was elaborated, based on the provisions of the RoP in place.

The *Needs Assessment* further mainly builds on the work previously conducted for the elaboration of the operational *Evaluation of the effectiveness, communication and stakeholder involvement of the EUSDR (final report published in July 2019)*³, including an on-line survey and semi-structured interviews. On this occasion, a wide variety of stakeholders was invited to fill in a questionnaire which comprised specific questions on the composition, functioning and communication of the SGs. Beyond that, the respondents were asked to identify obstacles and success factors for a strong involvement of the Steering Groups and to provide suggestions for improvement. The survey included questions addressed to all participants and separate sections dedicated only to PACs solely, to PACs & SGs members and to NCs solely. Hence, 85 valid responses were received from participants **covering all PAs**. In addition, Metis conducted 26 semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, seven EUSDR NCs provided valuable national-view insights, making it possible to emphasise key aspects across EUSDR states as regards the participation in the SG (meetings).

The *EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018*⁴ as well as the *EUSDR Operation Evaluation* revealed that during 2010-2018 notable differences in the engagement of the stakeholders in EUSDR PAs have been traced⁵. The tables included in the EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 and elaborated based on the information provided by the Hungarian EUSDR Presidency and by the PACs revealed that *“some member states strongly participated at SG meetings of each and every Priority Area, such as Hungary, Romania and Austria; followed by Czech Republic, Croatia, Germany and Slovakia. Meanwhile, other member states were selective in their participation in SG meetings. Low engagement of certain member states in different PAs can partially be traced back to different national focus areas.”*⁶

³ The Operational Evaluation represents a deliverable of the Danube Strategy Point – A Secretariat for the Danube Region. It was developed by an external service provider (Metis) contracted by DSP and published in July 2019. A main objective of the evaluation aims at enhancing the governance of the Strategy and providing an evidence-base for the macro-regional processes and workflows, as well as the needs for transnational governance. [Online](#).

⁴ EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 represents a deliverable of the Danube Strategy Point – A Secretariat for the Danube Region. It was elaborated by DSP and published in February 2020. It illustrates the developments and achievements within the EU Strategy for the Danube Region during/in the implementation period of 2016-2018, focusing on activities conducted at Priority Area level. Furthermore, the report provides information on the Priority Areas' cooperation within the Steering Groups, with various financing instruments and on cross-cutting activities. [Online](#).

⁵ Cf. EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 (2020): 31.

⁶ EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018 (2020): 34.

The chapter on EUSDR Governance of the *Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan*⁷ offered an insightful view of the work carried by the EUSDR core stakeholders involved in the internal governance system of the Strategy during 2010-2019.

The *Reports from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions* published in 2013⁸, 2014⁹, 2016¹⁰ and 2019¹¹ as well as the *Council conclusions on the implementation of the EU Macro-Regional Strategies published in 2017*¹² and 2019¹³ highlighted several challenges of the macro-regional strategies (MRS) as regards the improvement of the governance mechanisms and the participation of the national representatives in the SGs of the PAs.

The *Study on macro-regional strategies and their links with Cohesion Policy (2017)*¹⁴ elaborated by COWI, identified and pointed out some barriers to the smooth implementation of the MRS, including several key-aspects related to the representation and commitment of the participating states. Among other features, the report focuses on governance indicators and identifies drivers to be used in order to increase the effectiveness in the implementation of the macro-regional strategies.

In July 2020, the *EUSDR Governance Architecture Document*¹⁵ prepared under the EUSDR Croatian Presidency was endorsed. It defines the roles and the responsibilities of the EUSDR governance bodies (including Steering Groups for the very first time) and represents a valuable tool for empowering EUSDR key stakeholders and implementers.

⁷ The *Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan* represented the primary basis for the EUSDR Revised Action Plan. It was elaborated by the Danube Strategy Point upon the request of the EUSDR National Coordinators. Following its approval by the EUSDR National Coordinators, the document was handed over to the European Commission/DG REGIO (July, 2019). [Online](#).

⁸ COM(2013) 468 final. [Online](#).

⁹ COM(2014) 284 final. [Online](#).

¹⁰ COM(2016) 805 final. [Online](#).

¹¹ COM(2019) 21 final. [Online](#).

¹² Council conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies (2017). [Online](#).

¹³ Council conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies (2019). [Online](#).

¹⁴ COWI (2017): Study on Macro-Regional Strategies and their links with Cohesion Policy, Final Report. [Online](#).

¹⁵ EU Strategy for the Danube Region Governance Architecture (2020). [Online](#).

2. Governance Structure of the EUSDR Steering Groups

2.1 Review of Official Documents

The Steering Groups of EUSDR Priority Areas have been identified as “*key implementers of the strategy*”¹⁶ and defined as “*the central executive and decision-making bodies at PA level regarding objectives, formats and emphases of cooperation and future developments*”¹⁷. Their structure, roles and responsibilities and challenges are also mentioned in the Reports of the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions as shown in the Figure 1.

Based on the above mentioned Commission’s reports, the *Council conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies (2017)*, invited the participating countries and regions “*to **maintain a strong political commitment** together with a **high sense of ownership** for the implementation of their macro-regional strategies, **improve coordination and cooperation** in view of further enhancing the commitment to the strategies and their effective implementation, build the **necessary administrative capacity** to ensure that political commitment translates into effective implementation, **empower key implementers** (such as national coordinators, Priority Area coordinators/action group leaders, members of steering and actions groups) and **increase the ownership** of the involved line ministries; and mobilize regions, cities, agencies and institutions such as universities, private businesses and civil society, encouraging them to network, cooperate and participate in the implementation and development of macro-regional strategies*”¹⁸.

Also, the *Council conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies (2019)* called on the EUSDR participating states and regions “*to **empower key implementers**, such as national coordinators, priority and policy area coordinators, horizontal action leaders, group leaders, members of **steering** and actions **groups** and focal points in the line ministries, and by providing adequate staff and enhancing political support to ensure the fulfilment of their task and their **active participation in their groups***.”¹⁹

Moreover, the Joint Statements of the Ministers adopted within the framework of the EUSDR Annual Fora over the last decade stressed the need to **ensure continuous participation** of experts from relevant ministries or public institutions in the Steering Groups and the respective Working Groups of the Priority Areas and **allocate sufficient resources** and capacities for better coordination and governance of the EUSDR at national or regional levels, in order to provide for the necessary political backing for its implementation²⁰. At the same time it was emphasised that “***support for the participation of Steering Group members from non-member states should be provided via all instruments possible, including the Danube transnational programme***.”²¹

¹⁶ COWI (2017): 12.

¹⁷ EUSDR Governance Architecture (2020): 6.

¹⁸ Council Conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies (2017): 3 et seq.

¹⁹ Council Conclusions on the implementation of EU Macro-Regional Strategies (2019): 5.

²⁰ Cf. Joint Statement of Ministers responsible for Research and Innovation of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (2016): 4. [Online](#).

²¹ Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the participating states of the EU and of the European Commission (2014): 1. [Online](#).



Figure 1: Reports of the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the EESC and the CoR

REPORT from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the **European Union Strategy for the Danube Region COM(2013) 181 final**

- states that "National Contact Points, Priority Area Coordinators and their Steering Groups form the implementation core of the Strategy"
- emphasizes the need for "further embedding in political and administrative structures" as well as for "institutional stability, political recognition and allocation of sufficient human resources"

REPORT from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the **added value of macro-regional strategies COM(2013) 468 final**

- recognizes the administrative challenges faced within the Priority Areas in term of "lack of human resources, lack of continuity due to staff changes and insufficient or poor knowledge", but also regarding the financing.
- calls for increased accountability and participation from national governments

REPORT from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the **governance of macro-regional strategies COM(2014) 284 final**

- emphasizes the mission of the SG members as "key force to drive implementation forward in a thematically sound way"
- mentions the disparities in the participation at the SG meetings and points out the lack of adequate human resources, political support and financing as main source of the challenges
- stresses the integrative role of the SGs, especially for the non-EU member countries and recommends using the communication technology for facilitating good communication flows

REPORT from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the **implementation of the EU macro-regional strategies COM(2016) 805 final**

- highlights the issue of empowering the key implementers, including the members of the SGs
- recommends that close cooperation is ensured between steering groups members and the managing authorities of programmes supported by ESIF or other instruments is ensured in order to improve the effectiveness of the Strategy's implementation

REPORT from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the **implementation of EU macro-regional strategies COM(2019) 21 final**

- observes that "the main challenge for EUSDR is the decrease of political momentum at national level, which has resulted in a low level of participation in the steering groups of some priority areas"
- the active involvement of civil society in certain SG and in EUSDR relevant events has been mentioned

2.2 Organisation (SG Meetings & modus operandi)

The following section presents an overview of the organisation, tasks and responsibilities and workflows developed within the SGs mainly based on the provisions of the approved Rules of Procedure (RoP) of the EUSDR Priority Areas.

As of June 2020, all EUSDR Priority Areas followed their SG activities in line with RoP/Guidelines for SG functioning/Terms of Reference²² being in place. Most of the RoP were adopted during the first years of EUSDR implementation (2011-2013). Aiming at ensuring better functioning and alignment to the latest developments in the Region several PAs such as PA 1b, PA 6, PA 11 and most recently PA 9, revised their Rules of Procedure.

Most of the RoP comprise provisions on membership, roles and tasks of the SGs, working language, communication, organisation of the meetings and decision-making processes. Nevertheless, the provisions are adapted to the specific features of each EUSDR Priority Area, reflected in differences in several modi operandi. In this respect, three comparative tables have been elaborated based on the provisions of the RoP in force as regards the organisation, tasks and decision-making processes (Annex II, sections II.a, II.b, II.c).

As regards the **membership**, the SGs comprise representatives of all EUSDR participating states, EC (DG REGIO and line DGs) and relevant international organisations.

The RoP indicate three types of membership:

- Members with voting right, nominated with a mandate by EUSDR participating states (NCs),
- Observers with no voting rights, participating to the SGs meeting on a regular basis,
- Invited members and/or guests with an advisory capacity.

The principles of participation of all EUSDR participating states on equal footing and on voluntarily basis are explicitly mentioned.

In the decision-making process each country has **one vote**. Still, the number of the *state representatives* appointed in each Priority Area varies from one representative/country in PA 6 and PA 11, two representatives/country in PA 1a, PA 9 and PA 10 and three representatives for PA 3 (one for culture, one for tourism and one from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In some cases, the number of delegates depends on the decision of their states. Nevertheless, in all meetings the SG members act under a **clear mandate** and on behalf of their respective states. If the nominated members are unable to attend the meetings, the roles of **substitutes**, upon prior notification of the PACs, is in place.

As regards the *observers*, each PA identified relevant stakeholders for their thematic field. For instance, PA 1a states the “*European Commission (DG REGIO, DG MOVE and DG ENV), the Danube Commission, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, the International Sava River Basin Commission, the Pan-European Transport Corridor VII, the Danube Tourist Commission as well as the Working Community of the Danube Regions, Council of Danube Cities and Regions*”²³ as observer members. In case of PA 1b, representatives of the European Commission (EC), NCs and representatives of states outside the Danube Region, NGOs or financial institutions²⁴ can join. The RoP of PA 11 indicate

²² Some Priority Areas use the term of Guidelines (for SG functioning), with the same meaning as the term “RoP”. A common terminology for all PAs might be considered.

²³ RoP – PA 1a, art. 1. (1).

²⁴ Cf. RoP – PA 1b, art. 3.2.

the EC and DSP as “*main partners of the PACs in the implementation of the work*”²⁵ whilst representatives of Europol, SELEC, EUBAM, RCC, Hans Seidel Foundation and Konrad Adenauer Foundation are also potential invitees.

Clear indications on the criteria used for nominating permanent observers are mentioned only in the RoP of PA 6, namely: *the proposed international governmental and nongovernmental organisations pursue the goals of the PA, operate on more than one country of the Danube Region, are based in the Danube Region and have an agenda (field of activity) that has not yet been sufficiently represented by the other observer status organisations*²⁶.

Depending on the topics included on the agenda, the PACs and, in some cases (i.e. PA 4, PA 5) the SG members, can invite participants in advisory capacity. Participation in the SG meeting for PAC team members, NCs and NC team members, DSP team members, as well as for representatives of DTP and NGOs as guests is open upon agreement with respective PACs. Only the RoP of PA 8 state, that changes in the SG membership are to be ‘promptly reported’ to PACs²⁷. The other PAs do not have such clear provisions as regards this aspect²⁸.

The **coordination** of the SGs is jointly ensured by the respective PACs. Depending on the identified needs, the SGs may establish **Working Groups/Task Forces** and their work may be assisted by a **Technical Secretariat** (e.g. PA 11). Depending on the PA, Working Groups and Task Forces may be established as permanent structures or have a time limited mandate. In all cases, their work is dedicated to a sub-theme/action of the PA, thus focusing on developing and implementing specific measures. Working Groups functioning under PA 1A, PA 5, PA 7, PA 8 and PA 9 report to the PACs and SGs on the implemented activities and their performance is regularly assessed. PA 6 has set up Task Forces, joined by representatives from different member states, from civil society and academia. Each Task Force develops and submits to the SG for approval a yearly working plan and the chair reports on the status of its implementation. In case their results did not meet the expectations, changes of the composition, chairing and focus are possible. The chairs of the working groups/task forces established under different PAs are permanent observers in the SG meetings.

For most of the PAs, the **SG meetings should take place upon necessity, but at least twice a year**, with PACs being alternatively responsible for organisation of one meeting per year. In the first semester of 2020 some PAs held their 20th meeting, while others organised 12 meetings so far. The number of meetings held in each EUSDR PA during 2015-2020 is presented in the below table. Generally, the meetings are called with at least one month in advance and most of the RoP provide, that agenda and supporting documents should be available at least 10 days before the event. However, there are some exceptions as the RoP of PA 8 provide that SG members should be announced on the meeting date at least eight weeks in advance. Shortening the terms is an option in exceptional cases.

²⁵ RoP – PA 11, art 3.2

²⁶ Cf. RoP – PA 6, rule 3. (1).

²⁷ Cf. RoP – PA 8, art 1. (3).

²⁸ Institutionalised processes within PAs, which are not mentioned in RoP were not considered.

Table 1: Number of SG meetings

Priority Area	Meetings in 2015/2016	Meetings in 2017	Meetings in 2018	Meetings in 2019	Meetings in 2020*	Total
PA 1a	3	2	2	2	1	18
PA 1b	4	2	2	2	1	20
PA 2	4	2	2	2	1	20
PA 3	4	2	2	2	1	20
PA 4	4	2	2	2	1	19
PA 5	3	2	2	2	1	17
PA 6	4	1	2	1	-	12
PA 7	4	2	2	2	1	19
PA 8	4	1	2	1	1	17
PA 9	4	2	2	2	1	18
PA 10	4	2	2	2	2	17 (19)
PA 11	3	2	2	2	-	17

*Until 31 July 2020

Decisions may be adopted during the SG meetings or in written procedure via e-mail. Yet, the details of the **decision-making process** show slight variations from one PA to another. The different approaches are shown in Annex II.c.

In PA 1b, PA 8 and PA 9 decision can be made when at least half of the participating states attend the SG meeting. In case of PA 1a and PA 7 decisions can be made when 50%+1 of the partner states are present. The RoP of PA 3, PA 4, PA 6 and PA 8 stipulate that decision is made by the SG members **present** at the meeting. The principle of consensus applies in all PAs, except PA 3 (decision is adopted if it has a majority of 50% +1 of the present voting partner states) and PA 8 (decision will be reached by a simple majority of those present)²⁹. The RoP of PA 1a and PA 7 state that decisions directly affecting one of the EUSDR participating states cannot be made without the approval of the affected state. In all cases the **working language** is English and **communication** among the SG members and PACs is performed mainly in written, **by e-mail**. The elaboration and approval of **SG meeting minutes** is mandatory, but vary in PAs in procedures and deadlines. Another aspect covered by some PAs is related to the **expenses** generated by the organisation and participation at the SG meetings. Generally, the RoP state that the organisation costs are to be covered by the coordinating and/or organising countries, whilst travel, accommodation and any other extra expenses are to be supported by the participants themselves. Nevertheless, in case of PA 1b, the RoP also provide that “*the PACs may decide to cover travel and/or accommodation costs for members from non-EU countries and if in position exceptionally to all SG members or observers or invited experts*”³⁰.

²⁹ Cf. RoP – PA 8, art 8.(3) and RoP – PA 3, art. 7. (1).

³⁰ RoP – PA 1b, art. 7.3.

2.3 Key Priorities of SG RoP

The Steering Groups represent the central executive bodies of the PAs, playing a crucial role in transnational, inter-sectorial and inter-institutional³¹ cooperation. They assist the PACs in developing their activities and “*make decisions regarding the future development of the area, its objectives, co-operations and guidelines*”³². In this respect, the process of the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan finalised in 2020 is a relevant example. The proposal for the revised EUSDR Action Plan was developed by all PAs and implied intensive consultations between the PACs, SG members and other relevant stakeholders, undertaken during the SG meetings or by email. The SG members exchanged information on the status-quo in the implementation of the Action Plan adopted in 2010, assessing the results in their expertise field, identifying new cooperation possibilities, proposing new approaches for the already in place initiatives and establishing deadlines, targets and indicators for the implementation of the actions. In all these undertakings, the SG members acted in accordance with the tasks mentioned in the Priority Areas’ RoP.

After adoption of the revised EUSDR Action Plan, the SGs proceeded to **translating the actions into operational steps**, proposing on concrete deadlines and responsibilities and agreeing on the future implementation of the PA. Furthermore, the activities of the SGs have an impact on multiple governance (multilevel governance - MLG) and territorial levels. In a macro regional context, the members of the SGs are **active participants in a two-way communication flow** as they may ensure that suitable actions are anchored all over the region and in all participating states.

As shown in Annex II, in most EUSDR PAs, the SG members have a **key-role in identifying possible relevant stakeholders**, establishing national stakeholders’ networks, ensuring policy discussion and policy development, promoting cross-sectoral approaches and communicating at national level the results of the implementation of the Strategy. Acting as a network of national counterparts for the PACs, they participate in the identification of synergies and tailoring new initiatives.³³

In case of some PAs, **horizontal exchanges** are explicitly foreseen in the RoP. PAs from EUSDR Pillar 2 represent an illustrative example as participation of the Coordinators of the other two PAs of the Pillar 2 is mentioned in the RoP. Inter-pillar exchanges are foreseen and conducted by PA 7, PA 8 and PA 9. In practice, inter-pillar exchanges are made by several other PAs, however not explicitly mentioned in the RoP. Moreover, PA 5 RoP include stakeholders from the civil society, potential financing instruments, leaders or promoters of projects and representatives of other MRS among potential ad-hoc observers. Thus, project representatives are also usually being invited in order to support the project dissemination and provide information for the SG members regarding the progress of their activities which are strongly connected to the Actions of this PA. Close cooperation with relevant stakeholders within the EUSDR governance structure, including EC and DSP, as strategic supportive and coordinative structure, is explicitly mentioned in the RoP of several PAs (i.e. PA 11, PA 1b).

The PACs, together with the SGs ensure the implementation of the EUSDR and play a crucial role in the **future development of the PAs** as they represent the bodies entitled to adopt decisions that might lead to adjustments of objectives and activities. SG members shall/may propose adjustments of the actions, establish specific targets and assess the results of the EUSDR implementation in a specific field³⁴. In some of the PAs, SG members have the task to **assess the thematic focus of various projects**

³¹ Cf. EUSDR – Guidance to Priority Area Coordinators (2011): 4.

³² COWI (2017):16.

³³ Cf. Annex II – comparative overview of the tasks of the SG members, as mentioned in the RoP.

³⁴ Cf. Annex II – comparative overview of the tasks of the SG members, as mentioned in the RoP.

in order to determine the relevance for a PA. Following similar procedural steps for the majority of the PAs, the projects are presented to the PACs and a decision-making procedure is initiated. Based on the analysis of the of the contributions received, the PACs present the final situation and inform the SG if their members agree that a project could be declared as highly relevant for the PA or a Letter of Recommendation/Recommendation Letter/Letter of Merit³⁵ may be issued.

However, the role of the SG members is limited to assessing the compliance of the projects with the objectives and actions of the PA. In case of PA 1a it is explicitly stated that “*SG members are not responsible for the operational initiation, administration, organization or execution of projects*”³⁶. Similar provisions are included in the RoP of PA 1b³⁷, PA 9³⁸ and PA 10³⁹. Last, but not least, the SG members support the PACs in **reporting** and evaluation of the EUSDR as they identify progress related to the improvements that the actions and projects deliver and achievement of targets⁴⁰.

Summing up, similarities between the RoP can be depicted by studying the provisions on the membership and role of the different stakeholders participating in the SG meeting. However, in practice variations of the activity level of the SG members were reported in PAs with similar structure, composition and modus-operandi, according to the RoP. In order to improve the weak spots of SG participation, the following chapter gives an insight into the reasons for low participation.

³⁵ Both terms are used by different EUSDR PAs. A common terminology for all PAs might be considered.

³⁶ RoP – PA 1a, art. 2. (2).

³⁷ Cf. RoP PA 1b – art. 1.5.

³⁸ Cf. RoP PA 9 – art 2. (b).

³⁹ Cf. RoP PA 10 – art 2. (c).

⁴⁰ Cf. DSP (2019): 32.

3. Factors influencing the participation in Steering Groups: findings across the EUSDR

In this chapter, factors influencing participation in the Steering Groups will be examined in more detail, based on the results of the operational evaluation of EUSDR⁴¹. Both the online survey and the interviews with various stakeholders will be considered in more detail. The survey of the relevant stakeholders and the evaluation findings of the EUSDR operational governance level targeted in particular PACs and their SGs regarding stakeholder involvement at operational level. It is indicated that the current state of play is ranked as satisfactory but with room for improvement and large differences between the Priority Areas and the respective participating states.

Following the above mentioned sources, the factors influencing the participation in SGs are grouped into the following thematic categories: a) capacity factors, b) communication factors, c) operating environment factors, d) financing factors e) administrative factors and f) political factors.

a. Capacity factors

The participation rate in SGs results on the one hand from the potentially necessary structural reforms, which in some cases may be favoured by insufficient economic policy and low government capacities for MRS in the EUSDR participating states. On the other hand, due to a long-term declining political momentum starting at high level, but ultimately permeating all political levels and fields. In other words, the higher the EUSDR is on the political agenda, the more empowerment is provided for national stakeholders for the implementation of the Strategy. The resulting capacities of the stakeholders determine to a high degree their political mandate and possibilities of participation or non-participation in the Strategy and thus in the Steering Groups of the EUSDR. A decisive factor is the lack of the necessary capacity for EUSDR topics required for day-to-day effective work, which also affects the outreach to the national levels⁴². Further concrete hindrances which prevent stakeholders from participating in Steering Groups encompass the **lack of personnel** as well as **rather weak thematic expertise of SG members**⁴³. Capacity problems and diverging political profiles with substantial differences in terms of capacity and expertise are key conditions for the involvement of stakeholders in the Steering Groups⁴⁴. This lack of capacity is, up to a certain point, strongly influenced by the **lack of continuity of personnel** among the SG members, which would be very much needed to ensure sufficient continuation and implementation of previous initiatives. The continuous high fluctuation of staff is another factor that negatively influences the implementation of the EUSDR⁴⁵. This in turn may lead to *“frustration and diminishing commitment”*⁴⁶. Joint projects and actions are seen as an essential success factor in mobilising SG stakeholders, raising political interest and thus strengthening the momentum of the Strategy. The *“critical issue of low capacities of SG members”*⁴⁷ to have the capacities to plan and implement transnational actions and thus the **lack of common**

⁴¹ Cf. Metis (2019).

⁴² Cf. Metis (2019): 40.

⁴³ Cf. Annex IV – online survey.

⁴⁴ Cf. Metis (2019): 58.

⁴⁵ Cf. Annex IV – online survey.

⁴⁶ Metis (2019): 9.

⁴⁷ Metis (2019): 27.

projects and actions remains⁴⁸. To make the results of the EUSDR visible, joint projects and activities of strategic value are an important instrument and of central importance to the development of and commitment to the Strategy⁴⁹. Thus, the EUSDR is also implemented through projects and actions, where the capacity “mechanisms are supposed to trigger changes with the actors and stakeholders involved”⁵⁰ (e.g. Steering Groups), as elaborated in the following chapter.



As the need for capacity improvement is a challenge common to all four macro-regional strategies, a working group has been set up with the support of INTERACT to identify and implement a joint capacity development scheme among MRS stakeholders. The Danube Strategy Point is actively participating in this cross-MRS working group and its thematic sub-working groups.

b. Communication factors

The coordination of the EUSDR at the local, regional, national and macro-regional levels requires a strategic approach and efficient communication⁵¹. A major limitation faced when it comes to a low participation rate in EUSDR Steering Groups relates to **insufficient internal and external communication channels**⁵². In this context, a “sophisticated and technical language is a serious impediment for newcomers to the governance”⁵³ in general and the Steering Groups in particular⁵⁴. On the one hand, internally, there is a high load of information that needs to be exchanged among the institutions participating in the SGs, which generates a **lack of feedback loops**. On the other hand, these are needed in order to monitor and ensure the effectiveness of communication to national stakeholders⁵⁵. In addition to that, the representation of decision-making levels and general participation in SGs remain unsatisfactory⁵⁶, if adequate communication flows to work on crosscutting issues cannot be provided, since they require an integrated approach to sectoral policies. While “communication activities are recognised as good success factors for the continuity of a project”⁵⁷ in the external communication, the **insufficient dissemination and capitalisation of project results or (institutionalised) processes** is yet another obstacle. The communication of results beyond projects and processes to the public and towards the political level does not always bring the desired results. Close cooperation between the stakeholders (SG members, PACs, EC, NCs) and external partners is indispensable for good communication. The weaknesses of external communication arise due to the high number of actors involved, the multidimensional governance of the EUSDR, the cross-sectoral approach and the lack of aligned communication strategies at PA level⁵⁸. Noticeable improvements have been achieved in the past two years on the side of the EC/DG REGIO resulting in stronger

⁴⁸ Cf. Metis (2019): 38.

⁴⁹ Cf. Annex IV – online survey.

⁵⁰ Metis (2019): 25.

⁵¹ Cf. Annex IV – online survey.

⁵² Cf. Metis (2019): 35. Please see also EUSDR Communication Strategy for further information on internal and external communication channels. [Online](#).

⁵³ Metis (2019): 61.

⁵⁴ Cf. Annex IV – online survey.

⁵⁵ Cf. Metis (2019): 60.

⁵⁶ Cf. Metis (2019): 38 et seq.

⁵⁷ Metis (2019): 50 and Annex IV – online survey.

⁵⁸ Cf. Metis (2019): 61.

involvement SGs and at SG meetings. This is also reflected in the Operational Evaluation where, according to the PACs who participated in the online-survey, DG REGIO was highly involved in the implementation of the EUSDR⁵⁹.



The Danube Strategy Point acts as communication hub for Strategy stakeholders and elaborated a EUSDR Communication Strategy that includes visual identity elements of the Strategy, communication tools and a communication guide that is to be used by all EUSDR stakeholders. The EUSDR communication strategy is to be endorsed by the NCs.

c. Operating environment factors

The operational environment includes factors which significantly influence the implementation of cooperation and the activities in the EUSDR and, therefore, also the participation rate in EUSDR Steering Groups. The main weaknesses are that the **outreach and spill-over to the national level is very limited**⁶⁰ in many SGs and that the *“activity levels of SG members vary to a significant extent”*⁶¹. According to the EUSDR Operational Evaluation survey, the members of the SGs are rather *“perceived as single persons working rather isolated in line ministries”*⁶² for topics related to the EUSDR, which further favours the lack of outreach at national level. In this context, however, the national political interests of the respective stakeholders have to be taken into account and it *“might be required to broaden the outreach”*⁶³. Another recurring weakness is the **irregular participation** at SG meetings as well as the partly lacking of political commitment of SG members⁶⁴. However, the effectiveness of the EUSDR in influencing policy making and implementation activities depends largely on the (national) commitment of the SG members⁶⁵. The diversity of stakeholders and the governance structure of the EUSDR, which is a challenge on the one hand, is also an opportunity, as the SGs build on national representation structures. National representatives in the SGs can thus have a strong influence on the activities in the different Priority Areas. However, if the participation rate in some SGs remains rather low and passive, this often leads to a “wait and see” behaviour. This is also reflected in some cases in the **weak sense of ownership** of the SG members towards the EUSDR⁶⁶. The Strategy is very much an interdependent and interactive process, based on mutual trust, cooperation and ownership at the political level. The ownership may take into account national specificities and ensure strong and effective horizontal coordination and should therefore be reinforced. In addition to that, from the participating states’ perspective a strong role in *“facilitation and coordination by the EC and related services is required”*⁶⁷. Finally yet importantly, the often cited **too broad thematic scope** of PAs can be considered as one of the reasons for the low participation rate in EUSDR Steering Groups⁶⁸. It can be particularly difficult for individual SG members from a certain thematic area or line ministry to cover

⁵⁹ Metis (2019): 32.

⁶⁰ Cf. Metis (2019): 8; 60 and Annex IV – online survey.

⁶¹ Metis (2019): 40 and Annex IV – online survey.

⁶² Metis (2019): 58.

⁶³ Metis (2019): 59.

⁶⁴ Cf. Metis (2019): 41.

⁶⁵ Cf. Metis (2019): 59 and Annex IV – online survey.

⁶⁶ Cf. Metis (2019): 39; 41.

⁶⁷ Metis (2019): 62.

⁶⁸ Cf. Metis (2019): 40.

all thematic aspects of a Priority Area and thus to follow all topics dealt with and to be able to take decisions.



To smoothen the implementation of cooperation and the activities in the EUSDR, the DSP complies the supporting and connecting structure between the EUSDR participating states and key implementers of the Danube Strategy. At the same time DSP is an institutional memory safeguarding continuity, which is required in order to counteract all adverse effects of staff fluctuation.

d. Financing factors

Since their creation, the macro-regional strategies have been facing the absence of new institutions, legislation and funding (“3 No’s”) and therefore require the alignment and use of other sources, such as national funds or transnational cooperation programmes. This fact also applies when it comes to the alignment of funding for participation in the SGs. Within the EUSDR, this has to be covered either via EU funds, or via national funds. Being established in the economic and financial climate of the EU crisis, the EUSDR faced major challenges already in its initial starting phase. Therefore, the efficiency of (national) public spending has been an important issue throughout the course of history of the EUSDR and particular importance is attached to the issues of what and how the scarce resources available are spent and what the impact of such spending is⁶⁹. Against this background, SG members **lack sufficient financial resources**⁷⁰. Also in regard to EU funding programmes, for funding and financing the projects relevant for the Priority Areas, the supporting framework structures were provided and aligned belatedly. The access to most of the EU programmes to facilitate the implementation of the EUSDR was not available for many of the non-EU countries for a significant period of time⁷¹. Due to the difficult financial situation, for example the **lack of “financing of travel expenses”**⁷², their participation in EUSDR and the SGs was not sufficiently ensured. In order to counteract this, a (currently no longer applicable) grant from the European Commission was made available through the state of Baden-Württemberg for the technical assistance of the respective coordination of the PAs (closed call). Further progress has been made in the field of governance support to the Strategy via financial support for PAC activities, particularly regarding the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme (DTP), which provides financing for Priority Area Coordination and their activities.



With the introduction of the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme, close alignment between DTP and EUSDR has been achieved. For example, all DTP Priority Axes and their associated Specific Objectives have direct linkages to the Pillars of one or more EUSDR Priority Areas. Henceforth, simplified cost options for the financing of PACs in order to reduce the administrative work burden for beneficiaries and programme management may be reflected.

⁶⁹ Cf. Annex IV – online survey.

⁷⁰ Cf. Metis (2019): 37.

⁷¹ Cf. Metis (2019): 52.

⁷² Metis (2019): 41 et seq.

e. Administrative factors

Within the EU Danube Region Strategy it is important to develop a supportive administrative setting also for the operative work of the Steering Groups to ensure a smooth horizontal coordination. Some of the participating states in the EUSDR have **not appointed SG members**⁷³ for quite some years and **SG members do not always have the mandate to act and facilitate decisions**⁷⁴, which leads to uneven levels of participation and “*creates frustration and diminishing commitment*”⁷⁵. Further, if some SG members are appointed by NCs and subsequently the SG lists are not updated accordingly, the information about the organisation of events, such as seminars or SG meetings, may not reach them. On the other hand, if the information reaches them, they may still not participate due to other, **overlapping tasks**. While “*decision-making, planning and consultation processes were considered as transparent and responsive*”⁷⁶ in the Operational Evaluation of the EUSDR, decision-making powers of the SG members remain unsatisfactory. Thus, if SG members participate in meetings with **limited decision-making powers**, it reduces the efficiency of the meeting, as “*meetings are restricted to a rather superficial exchange of information*”⁷⁷ and, over time, determines the low level of participation, when written procedures can be expected to be initiated anyway. The members of the Steering Group should be senior enough to take decisions in a multi-country context. The absence of some members of the Steering Group can favour uncertainties due to the **lack of a mutual understanding** of the administrative setting⁷⁸. There is a need for more clarification of the macro-regional concept and interpretative documents of the EUSDR on the subject of the Steering Groups’ inter alia tasks, composition, structure, size, frequency and type of meetings. An initial milestone already underway was to create a dialogue between national stakeholders of the SGs on what they expect from the Strategy. In addition to that, the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper was endorsed in July 2020, which clarifies roles, responsibilities and interdependencies of EUSDR key stakeholders such as Steering Groups first-time.



In order to foster a sound common basis for further and improved communication, organisation and implementation of the EUSDR, the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper was endorsed by National Coordinators in July 2020. The jointly elaborated document, initiated by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency with support of the DSP, clarifies roles, responsibilities and interdependencies of EUSDR key stakeholders, including, for the first time, the Steering Groups. The aim of the Paper is to improve coordination and cooperation to further enhance the commitment to the Strategy and its effective implementation and to support the development of necessary administrative capacity to make sure that political commitment translates into effective implementation of the EUSDR.

⁷³ Cf. Metis (2019): 27.

⁷⁴ Cf. Metis (2019): 62.

⁷⁵ Metis (2019): 9.

⁷⁶ Metis (2019): 40.

⁷⁷ Metis (2019): 40.

⁷⁸ Cf. Metis (2019): 41.

f. Political factors

The participation in Steering Groups cannot only be considered from a technical or administrative perspective, it should also be addressed on a political level. As previously described, the lack of appointments of SG members is reflected in **fading (political) commitment**⁷⁹. However, exactly these high-level political commitments are seen as a key success factor according to the survey of the Operational Evaluation of the EUSDR⁸⁰. It is therefore necessary to have a comprehensive understanding of the Strategy on national level and to be willing and open for cooperation in order to reach a strong involvement in the Steering Group. With the involvement of 14 member states declaring a will to jointly address common issues and challenges of 115 million inhabitants, the setting-up of sustainable SGs in the EUSDR often fails on account of the **lack of common political priorities**⁸¹. The wide range of issues addressed by the Strategy are divided among four Pillars and 12 Priority Areas to allow targeted work in specific thematic fields. Nonetheless, stakeholders on national level represented in the SGs follow the agenda-setting of their states to pursue their agendas within this framework. Hence, it often appears to be *“difficult to find a common macro-regional interest sphere”*⁸² beyond national interests. In that respect, national stakeholders often experience **insufficient backing from involved line ministries** of their participating state⁸³. Sufficient support from national line ministries is of utmost importance when aiming at strategic decisions within different policy fields tackled by the EUSDR. Low national or regional coordination⁸⁴ leads to inadequate backup of SG members’ decisions taken on Strategy level. The lack of support of the activities of SG members by their national line ministries is also an obstacle to an effective coordination process of the EUSDR. A similar phenomenon can also be observed in the **decline in participation of representatives of the European Commission, DG REGIO and line DGs as well as of existing international organisations**⁸⁵. This aspect influences significantly the dynamics of Steering Groups and the range of opportunities that the EUSDR can benefit from, if the leverage effect of high-level institutions is missing. The design of the EUSDR is to a large extent based on the strategic guidance and facilitator role of the European Commission⁸⁶. Factors such as the assurance of the momentum, the mediation in stalemates, or support to key actors are of high relevance for the success and the drive of the EUSDR and the work of the SGs.



A strong role in facilitation and strategic coordination by the EC and related services is highly desired by EUSDR participating states. To ensure this role of EC/DG REGIO in the work of the Steering Groups, stronger involvement has been reached in the past two years, as the participation of EC staff at SG Meetings shows. The strong involvement of the EC in the strategic levers further fostered the process of embedding the EUSDR into EU programmes.

⁷⁹ Cf. Metis (2019): 41.

⁸⁰ Cf. Metis (2019): 23 and Annex IV – online survey.

⁸¹ Cf. Metis (2019): 41.

⁸² Metis (2019): 41.

⁸³ Cf. Metis (2019): 41.

⁸⁴ Cf. Metis (2019): 8.

⁸⁵ Cf. Metis (2019): 27; 39.

⁸⁶ Cf. Metis (2019): 61.

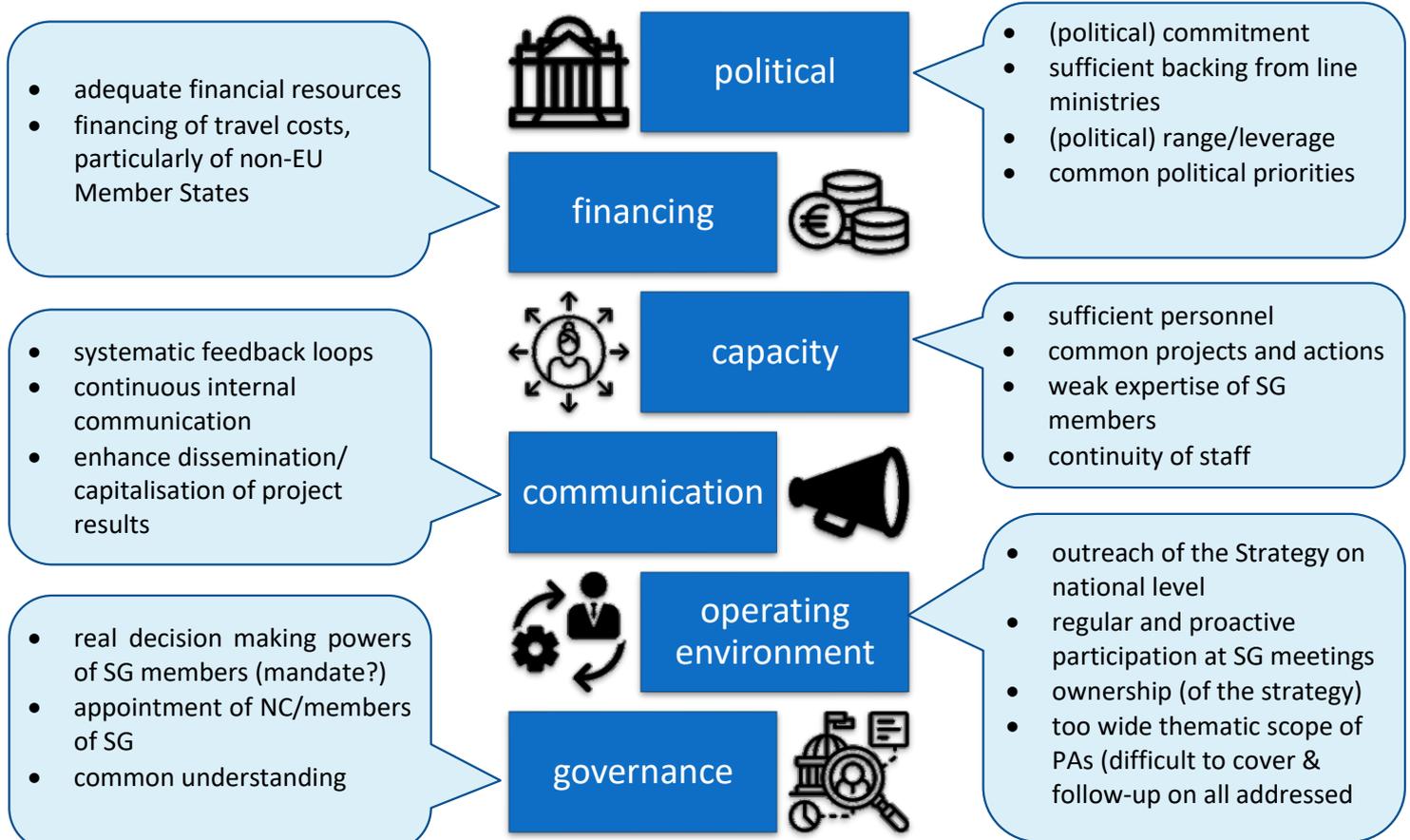


Figure 2: Reasons for low participation in SGs.

4. Comparative perspective: Determinations and possible approaches

4.1 Lessons learned

As described in the previous chapters, the low participation rate in EUSDR Steering Groups is a recurring theme which has been of concern for EUSDR core stakeholders from the very beginning of the implementation of the Strategy: Already in 2011 the Labgroup of the EUSDR, a think tank, reflecting on how PACs and funding sources can implement the Strategy in a coordinated way, stated in their third meeting in Belgrade, that participation in the Steering Groups was one of the major bottlenecks in the EUSDR⁸⁷. In a 10-year period, the low engagement in SGs has never lost its relevance. The European Commission states in 2013, “the frequent meetings (e.g. EUSDR Priority Area Steering Groups) are not always well attended”⁸⁸ followed in 2014 by “although Steering Groups, comprising national experts have been set up in most thematic areas, not all have good participation”⁸⁹. The same picture emerges in 2016, with the European Commission even alerting that “poor attendance at Steering Group meetings”⁹⁰ can stall the whole process. The latest report on this matter, the second EC report on the implementation of MRS⁹¹ highlights that the participation in Steering Groups of the PAs is considered to be unsatisfactory, which generates frustrations. All in all, the recurring perception on low participation in EUSDR Steering Groups has been highlighted as a shortcoming of the EUSDR. There is a need to take stock of the lessons learnt as well as to emphasise the benefits of the potential change: What can we learn from the practices of other macro-regional strategies and the implementation of the EUSDR to date, taking into account the particularities of the Danube Region? The EUSDR and its stakeholders should position themselves clearly in this respect. Convincing EU decision-makers and influencing Steering Groups as a key force to advance implementation is a long process. A personal touch to the EUSDR and the individual commitment of stakeholders is very important to promote best practices or policy recommendations such as enhancing the participation rate in SGs. It can be assumed that win-win situations are the most promising, for the transnational level of the EUSDR as well as for the national/regional level.

In the following chapter, examples and approaches will be presented as "best practices" tackling low participation in EUSDR Steering Groups.

4.2 Best Practices

In this section, best practices of the different Priority Areas will be presented with regard to their Steering Groups and the organisation of Steering Group meetings. It should be noted that these are examples of successful application in the respective Priority Area, although this does not necessarily or can by no means apply to all Priority Areas. The following selection of best practices was identified by the Danube Strategy Point. Furthermore, it is not precluded that the following best practices have also been applied in other Priority Areas.

⁸⁷ Interact (2011): Third meeting for the Danube Region Strategy Labgroup. Putting the EUSDR in the right perspective. [Online](#).

⁸⁸ European Commission (2013): Report from the commission concerning the added value of macro-regional strategies. COM(2013) 468 final, p. 8. [Online](#).

⁸⁹ European Commission (2014): Report from the commission concerning the governance of macro-regional strategies. COM(2014) 284 final, p. 8. [Online](#).

⁹⁰ European Commission (2016): Report from the commission on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. COM(2016) 805 final, p. 4. [Online](#).

⁹¹ European Commission (2019): Report from the commission on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. COM(2019) 21 final, p. 8. [Online](#).

Priority Area 1a – Waterways Mobility



Within the framework of the Steering Group meetings of Priority Area 1a, meetings were held in Brussels following other events of these stakeholders. This can be considered best practice in two respects. On the one hand, the momentum of the previous event can be used for the SG meeting, making participation more attractive for members in terms of travelling, time and cost resources. On the other hand, by merging events, a higher number of participants, involvement and commitment can be achieved. In addition, the location of the SG meeting in Brussels is more likely to ensure the participation of other institutions, such as the European Commission and its line DGs, representations of the countries/regions and associations or organisations.

Priority Area 1b – Rail-Road-Air Mobility



Priority Area 1b closely cooperates with the European Commission and is involved in monitoring the work related to the “Core TEN-T Corridors” and to the “Eastern Partnership Transport Panel”. In addition, the exchange of experience with other MRS (EUSAIR and EUSALP) is pro-actively pursued. The close cooperation and collaboration with international institutions, associations and organisations is therefore also reflected in the multifaceted composition of the Steering Group, the high level of participation in it and the representation of numerous experts. Through their advisory or monitoring role, the capacities of the Steering Group and thus the entire PA may be reinforced.

Priority Area 2 – Sustainable Energy



For exploiting synergies with international institutions such as the Energy Community or the establishment of the Central and South Eastern Europe Gas Connectivity (CESEC) initiative, the thematic alignment of the Steering Group is fostered also through their active and committed participation in the SG and its meetings. Through the political interests of the respective stakeholders in the field of sustainable energy, the work of the PA and the SG is supported while the extension of the outreach and transition to the regional, national and supranational level can be ensured. Hence, the well-established operational environment of PA 2 significantly influences the implementation of cooperation as well as the activities in the Priority Area and, therefore, the participation rate in the SG.

PA 3 – Culture and Tourism



In addition to the ministries of the PACs (Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration and the Bulgarian Ministry of Tourism), Priority Area 3 also involves in their SG other relevant line ministries in the field of Culture and Tourism in their regular work. Thus the Ministries of Culture from Romania and Bulgaria and the Romanian Ministry of Tourism are involved as strategic partners and supporting institutions. This can be an advantage in order to find a basis for political priorities and a common sphere of interest. In addition, it may ensure sufficient backing from the line ministries involved for an effective coordination process of the Priority Area. This is essential, as proper support from national/regional line ministries is vital to support strategic decisions in different policy fields tackled by the EUSDR.



PA 4 – Water Quality

PA 4 closely cooperates with different partners and organisations (International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), Carpathian Convention, Global Water Partnership and International Sava River Basin Commission) whose representatives regularly attend the SG meetings in advisory roles and inform the participants on the most recent initiatives undertaken or on the results achieved. To be cost-effective, the SG meetings are organised back to back with ICPDR or other thematic events, usually enabling the participants dealing with related topics in their daily activities to benefit from information and best practice exchanges, limiting travel and accommodation costs for their participation. The collaboration with other PAs (especially PA 5 and PA 7) and the participation of the NCs in the SG meetings is worth being mentioned as they enhance the chances to deepen the exchanges on cross-cutting topics.



PA 5 – Environmental Risks

To improve the participation of interested experts in the activities of the Priority Area 5, one of its latest initiatives consists in establishing a new Working Group in 2019 (WG), dedicated to the implementation of one of the actions in the revised EUSDR Action Plan. The Disaster Management Working Group (DMWG) addresses mainly civil protection organizations and fire and rescue services encouraging standardized response activities and extended cooperation between the Danube Region states. The concept proposed for settling the DMWG's structure includes nominees from governmental sector, NGOs, academia and project owners on voluntarily bases. The WG had its first meeting in June 2020.



PA 6 – Biodiversity, Landscapes, Air and Soil Quality

Encouraging the participation of international governmental and NGOs as permanent observers in the SG meetings, PA 6 ensures a coordinated transparent implementation of the Strategy in the fields of biodiversity, landscapes, quality of air and soils. Formally integrated in the governance of the Priority Area, the Task Forces of PA 6 are considered “a positive experience”⁹². They gather actors from the civil society, academia and representatives of regional or national authorities, each one being involved in specific PA 6 actions implementation (Danube Sturgeon Task Force, Danube Region Invasive Alien Species Network, Danubeparks – Network of protected areas, Soil Strategy Network in the Danube Region, Task Force on Air Quality, Task Force on pesticides and chemicals and Masterplan Bavarian Danube Working Group). The task forces are open to any stakeholder willing to bring their contribution to implementing an action from the PA 6 Action Plan and their Chairs are invited to Steering Group meetings as permanent observers. They also report on the activities undertaken and on the implementation of their work plans. DG ENV or other relevant line DGs' participation in the SG meeting is also ensured. Moreover, in line with the topics addressed by the PA, the last two SG meetings were organised in natural protected areas, enabling on spot visits and exchange on best practice examples.

⁹² EUSDR PA 6 (2019): Study on Opportunities and proposals for a revised roadmap. [Online](#).



PA 7 – Knowledge Society

Representatives of the Joint Research Centre and DG REGIO attend PA 7 SG meetings on a regular basis, either in person or by making use of digital technology. This facilitates direct information flow between different EUSDR governance levels, making possible timely feedback for the proposals presented by different stakeholders. At the same time, when variations in the effectiveness and involvement of the working groups were identified, changes in the structure and Chairing of the respective working groups were proposed and approved by the SG members. Last, but not least, organizing the SG meetings in Belgrade might contribute to a high attendance degree of the representatives of the EUSDR partner states in the Balkans.



PA 8 – Competitiveness of Enterprises

Facing challenges generated by the change of both PACs in a very short period, PA 8 had to deal also with low involvement of some working groups in the implementation of the proposed actions. In order to overcome this issue, the working groups were reorganised so that efficient coordination and active participation in the implementation of relevant PA 8 projects is ensured. Furthermore, the participation of the representatives of EC (DG REGIO) in the SG meetings is ensured on regular basis.



PA 9 – People and Skills

PA 9 experienced a constant high participation along the time due to jointly coordinated factors, such as: ensuring financing for the non-EU countries representatives' participation, choosing an easily accessible location and organising the SG meeting back to back with other PA 9 relevant events (stakeholders' meetings, Danube Region Monitor meetings etc.). Moreover, the structure of the agenda facilitates the exchanges on the latest developments at policy level in each Danube participating state in the fields of education and labour, "breaking the ice" and ensuring the prerequisites for an active participation of all representatives.



PA 10 – Institutional Capacity

In order to stimulate transnational civil society cooperation, Priority Area 10 closely cooperates with civil society organisations and the integration of local and regional administration striving for maintaining and consolidating strong linkages with stakeholders on local, regional, national and EU-level. Hence, the Steering Group provides a unique platform reflecting the multidimensional governance and quadruple helix of actors within EUSDR. This can be used to activate effective multi-level governance procedures and implement them in the Priority Area. In doing so, the Steering Group is making use of further synergies within the MRS, e.g. in a joint embedding initiative with the EUSDR ESF network together with Priority Area 9.



PA 11 – Security

Priority Area 11 is one of the few areas that have implemented a coordination office. The so-called Coordination Bureau provides assistance to the Priority Area Coordinators in order to guarantee the qualitative, responsible and innovative implementation of the Strategy. This is reflected, for example, in the organisation and conduct of their SG meetings. The members of the Steering Group receive comprehensive information and technical support at an early stage. In addition, an attractive social programme is offered for SG members and international organisations involved in the respective host rotating state. This hospitality strengthens the sense of ownership among the SG members.

4.3 Thinking beyond: approaches in other macro-regional strategies

*“Experience to date with macro-regional strategies shows that streamlined governance mechanisms are crucial for effective implementation. Experience also shows that efficient trans-border governance systems are complex and that the process of setting these up is inevitably gradual. The Commission’s May 2014 report on governance identifies three main requirements: **strong political leadership, effective decision-making and good organisation.**”*

COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS concerning a European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region on 28 July 2015

This chapter seeks to provide the basis for a potential discussion on common Thematic Steering / Action Group challenges across all four macro-regional strategies⁹³: the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region (EUSAIR), the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). Looking at (Thematic) Steering / Action Group practices and challenges in other MRS, no comparative analysis has been carried out so far. Therefore, this chapter gives a first overview of the information currently available on practices and challenges in (Thematic) Steering / Action Group across all macro-regional strategies. Although the governance structure of all four MRS is very similar, the terms for the equivalent of an EUSDR Priority Area/Priority Area Coordinator/Steering Group slightly vary across the four strategies. The following table gives an overview of the terms used in each strategy. The numbers in brackets indicate the number of thematic fields and into how many thematic groups (Pillars) they are clustered in each strategy:

Table 2: Terms for PACs, SGs and other stakeholder groups across the four MRS

EUSDR	EUSAIR	EUSALP	EUSBSR
Pillar (4)	Pillar (4)	Thematic Policy Area (3) ⁹⁴	Objectives (3)
Priority Area (12)	Topic (10)	Action (9)	Policy Area (13) ⁹⁵
Priority Area Coordinator	-	Action Group Leader	Policy Area Coordinator
-	Pillar Coordinator	-	-
Steering Group	Thematic Steering Group	Action Group	Steering Committee/Coordination Group ⁹⁶
National Coordinators	Governing Board	Executive Board	National Coordinators
-	-	General Assembly ¹⁰¹	-

⁹³ More information available on each strategy online: [EUSAIR](#) / [EUSALP](#) / [EUSBSR](#) / [EUSDR](#)

⁹⁴ Plus one cross-cutting Policy Area („Governance“).

⁹⁵ Next to its 13 Policy Areas, EUSBSR also has four Horizontal Actions (Spatial Planning, Neighbours, Capacity, and Climate) which are implemented by four Steering Committees/Coordination Groups.

⁹⁶ The title of the group is decided by the coordinator, it can be called e.g. Steering Group, Steering Committee, Coordination Group or Reference Group, also see Interact (2015): Macro-Regional Glossary. [Online](#).

Considering the similar structure of the MRS⁹⁷, a look at the Governance Papers / Governance Guidance notes of each strategy⁹⁸ shows that the tasks and responsibilities ascribed to the (Thematic) Steering/Action Groups and their coordinators are very much intertwined.

The main difference is that EUSAIR, EUSBSR and EUSDR provide a list of responsibilities of (Thematic) *Steering / Action Groups*, while EUSALP provides a list of responsibilities of just the *coordinators (Action Group Leaders)* but not so of the Action Groups themselves. This list of EUSALP Action Group Leader responsibilities specifies two joint tasks of the Action Group and its leader.

Therefore, the following summary of common responsibilities mostly includes (Thematic) Steering/Action Groups task as defined within EUSAIR, EUSBSR and EUSDR. The two above mentioned EUSALP Action Group tasks are added to this list. The common denominator of officially documented SG responsibilities across all MRS is:

- Selection of actions/projects in accordance with the objectives and targets of the Action Plan and its objectives (within EUSALP this is listed as the joint task of the Action Group Leader and the Action Group; also, within EUSALP and EUSAIR this task includes the definition of selection criteria)
- Facilitating the implementation of actions/projects
- Coordination with other Priority Areas
- Maintaining a dialogue with funding programmes/financial instruments
- Communicating results of the Priority Area to the policy level
- Monitoring and reporting on the progress towards the defined targets and indicators
- Facilitating policy discussions on the respective Priority Area

In addition to these (Thematic) Steering/Action Group responsibilities listed in all four Governance Papers/Guidelines there are two specificities in the cases of EUSAIR and EUSALP: The EUSAIR Thematic Steering Groups can be chaired by a tandem of participating states on a rotating basis, one period lasting up to three years. However, such rotations have not been taking place, as permanent chairs proved to provide more stability and continuity. A specific point of the EUSALP Governance Paper is that it explicitly lists the drafting of a working plan for the Action Group as a joint task of the Action Group Leader and the Action Group itself. Having taken stock of the official responsibilities of the (Thematic) Steering/Action Group in all four macro-regional strategies, the following paragraphs focus on the identified challenges of SGs across EUSAIR, EUSALP and EUSBSR as discussed in studies, joint declarations and EC communications (see footnotes for respective sources). These challenges will be discussed along the lines of capacity factors, communication factors, operating environment factors, financing factors and political factors, as defined in chapter 3.

The central issue of participation in SG meetings by designated representatives has also been addressed in the EUSALP context. In 2016 the European Commission observed that the involvement

⁹⁷ Cf. COM(2014) 284 final: 3. [Online](#).

⁹⁸ Cf. EUSAIR (2014): Joint Statement of the representatives of the countries participating in the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region on a Governance and Management System, 6. [Online](#).

EUSALP (2016): Guidance Note – EUSALP Governance, 7 et seq. [Online](#).

EUSBSR (2016): Guidelines for setting up a steering committee/coordination group in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR), 3. [Online](#).

EUSDR (2020): 6 et seq. [Online](#).

of the seven member states in the Action Groups was quite heterogeneous in terms of composition, involvement of the countries/regions and working styles and that some Action Groups had not yet found their ideal composition⁹⁹. In this context, EC considers as “ideal composition” sufficient representatives from the regional and national level of the respective administrations. EC also observed that some participating states had partly decreased their involvement, while others had intensified their commitment⁹⁹. This aspect can be summarised as a **capacity factor** and can be seen as a common challenge of EUSDR and EUSALP, which might be worthwhile to discuss together. Within the EUSBSR it has been noted that SG members lack the mandate for decision making, which was framed as an obstacle to policy dialogue in the 2017 COWI company study on MRS¹⁰⁰, but can also be seen as a capacity factor.

When it comes to MRS internal **communication** of results and feedback loops, the EUSALP General Assembly¹⁰¹ has taken an active approach in inviting SG members to inform the Executive Board on activities to be undertaken every year as well as on implemented measures and the degree to which targets have been achieved¹⁰². Also, the Rules of Procedure for the EUSALP Executive Board foresee that Action Group Leaders may be invited to Executive Board meetings to give briefings on ongoing activities *“in order to enhance horizontal coordination and to strengthen the implementation priorities”*¹⁰³. In EUSAIR this mechanism is ensured via inclusion of Pillar Coordinators in the Governing Board¹⁰⁴. Equally, in EUSDR this aspect of Priority Area coordination with National Coordinators is already institutionalised through joint NC-PAC meetings taking place at least once a year. However, communication and coordination mechanisms between SG members and National Coordinators throughout the year might be a worthwhile topic to explore, be it in EUSAIR, EUSALP, EUSBSR or EUSDR.

When it comes to **operating environment** factors, on the one hand it has been noted that many EUSBSR stakeholders at national level (sectoral ministries) are not used to transnational cooperation¹⁰⁵. On the other hand, insufficient outreach on national level was discussed as a hindrance for the implementation of EUSDR in chapter 3. In this respect, the EUSBSR Steering Committee Guidelines (see footnote 98, EUSBSR (2016: 2)) explicitly call for the involvement of diverse stakeholders such as national contact points of the EUSBSR, representatives of other macro-regional strategies, regional organisations, associations, representatives of civil society, other PACs, interested ministries/agencies, managing authorities of EU programmes and financial institutions in SG meetings whenever relevant. Also, EUSALP National Coordinators have encouraged Action Groups to **use existing networks in the Alpine Region and capitalise** on the results achieved by cooperative projects in the region¹⁰⁶, such as the already ongoing exchange with the Alpine Convention’s working bodies¹⁰⁷. Similarly, the Working Paper on the Governance of EUSAIR calls for the inclusion of subnational and regional representatives, regional cooperation organisations and representatives of international

⁹⁹ Cf. European Commission (2016): Commission Guidance Note on the 4th objective of the EUSALP Action Plan, 3. [Online](#).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. COWI (2017): 147 and 160, respectively. [Online](#).

¹⁰¹ General Assembly = political representatives of the Alpine states as well as EC representatives.

¹⁰² Cf. EUSALP (2017): Joint declaration on the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), Rottach-Egern, 3. [Online](#).

¹⁰³ EUSALP (2018): Rules of Procedure for the Executive Board of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region, Article 5. [Online](#).

¹⁰⁴ Cf. EUSAIR (2014): Towards a streamlined governance and management architecture for the EUSAIR, 2. [Online](#).

¹⁰⁵ COWI (2017): 146 et seq.

¹⁰⁶ EUSALP (2016): Brdo Joint Statement on the European Union Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), 3. [Online](#).

¹⁰⁷ EUSALP (2017): Joint declaration on the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP), Munich, 2. [Online](#).

financial institutions in SG meetings when relevant. Clearly, the aspect of how to extend the SGs' operating environment has been taken into account in all MRS, however, little is known about the different experiences across Priority Areas and MRS in this respect.

Moving on to **financing factors**, it has been discussed to facilitate participation in SG meetings by financial means within EUSDR as well as within EUSAIR. EUSAIR is made up in relative terms by the highest number of non-EU countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Serbia – five of nine participating countries) as compared to other MRS. It has been pointed out that EUSAIR needs more dedicated resources to facilitate the participation of non-EU countries, not least because of an asymmetry in SG meeting participation¹⁰⁸. This can be seen as a common challenge of EUSDR and EUSAIR, however, not so of EUSALP and EUSBSR. In the case of the EUSDR, the issue of financial support for non-EU countries to facilitate meeting participation has been addressed in some Steering Groups. Regarding support for Working Group (=sub-group) members, a solution has yet to be found¹⁰⁹. As for EUSALP and EUSBSR, the Rules of Procedure¹¹⁰ and the Terms of Reference (Steering Committees *Tourism*¹¹¹, *Clean Shipping*¹¹² and *Secure*¹¹³), respectively, state that SG members' travel and accommodation expenses are to be covered by their respective institutions and this rule does not seem to have been challenged in any other EUSALP or EUSBSR document.

As for **political momentum**, its lack has been discussed not only in the context of EUSDR, but also within EUSAIR. EUSAIR has been closely coordinated with the Adriatic Ionian Initiative¹¹⁴ (AII) from the very beginning. This initiative, counting nine member countries¹¹⁵, was founded following the Balkan crisis of the 1990s and is dedicated to strengthening regional cooperation to promote political and economic stability with the ultimate aim of facilitating European integration. According to a 2015 analysis of the EUSAIR founding process¹⁰⁸, the coordination between EUSAIR and AII mainly takes place on NC level. To improve the political momentum of EUSAIR, the analysis suggests that this coordination could be made more explicit on SG level.

Another influential factor on the political momentum of MRS and their SGs is the support given by the European Commission and its line DGs to the (Thematic) Steering Group/Action Group, as described in chapter 3. In this context EUSDR and EUSBSR Steering Group meetings have occasionally been organised in Brussels (also see chapter 4.2) in order to increase the dialogue and involvement of line DGs¹¹⁶. Interviewed members of EUSBSR Policy Areas emphasised good relations with DG REGIO, but pointed out that the relationship with other line DGs varied¹⁰⁰. Also in the case of the EUSDR, relations between the different SGs and respective line DGs vary – while some SGs are in exchange with DG REGIO and other line DGs, in other cases there is room for improvement¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. OBC & CeSPI (2015): The EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region one year later: the fatigues of the process, 5. [Online](#).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. DSP (2020): EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018, 33. [Online](#).

¹¹⁰ Cf. EUSALP (2016): Rules of Procedure for the Action Groups of the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region, 1. [Online](#).

¹¹¹ Cf. EUSBSR Steering Committee Tourism (2013): Terms of Reference International Steering Committee "Tourism Policy in the Baltic Sea Region", 2. [Online](#).

¹¹² Cf. EUSBSR Steering committee Clean Shipping (2014): Terms of Reference International Steering Committee for the Priority Area on Clean Shipping of the EUSBSR, 2. [Online](#).

¹¹³ Cf. EUSBSR Steering Committee Secure (2015): EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region - Priority Area Secure -TERMS of REFERENCE for the Steering Group. [Online](#).

¹¹⁴ Adriatic Ionian Initiative. [Online](#).

¹¹⁵ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia

¹¹⁶ Cf. COWI (2017): 160 et seq.

This first comparison of (Thematic) Steering / Action Group challenges addressed in official MRS documents and reports shows that there are several issues which EUSDR Steering Groups seem to share with their counterparts in the other three MRS: The **fluctuation in SG meeting participation** is an issue which might be jointly discussed and addressed by EUSDR and EUSALP stakeholders.

When it comes to stronger **communication** and feedback-loops between Steering Group members through joint meetings, there seem to be arrangements in place in all four MRS. A cross-MRS exchange on how to strengthen feedback-loops throughout the year, besides joint meetings, might provide useful ideas for the benefit of all (Thematic) Steering Group / Action Group members. The task of further extending the outreach of MRS to the national level is one which has also been addressed in official documents across all four MRS. Also the practical aspects of this task could be discussed in a cross-MRS format. Finally, a joint exchange between EUSDR and EUSAIR stakeholders might be useful to address the issue of non-EU country participation in SG meetings.



Speaking of exchange across the four macro-regional strategies, there are already two valuable platforms in place which could be extended to address (Thematic) Steering / Action Group challenges: On the one hand, the meetings of chairpersons of the National Coordinators groups (TRIO Presidencies) of the four macro-regional strategies and the European Commission, initiated by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency in February 2020, could be extended to include a format for (Thematic) Steering / Action Groups of the four MRS. On the other hand, the joint cross-MRS Working Group for Capacity Building, facilitated by Interact, has also started to address some of the above described challenges.

5. Conclusion

The analysis in chapter 3 has clearly shown that the cohesive elements in the EUSDR and thus the participation in the EUSDR strongly depend on the PACs and the Steering Groups as key forces. There is a need to focus on a rather limited number of common challenges and opportunities to ensure ownership, engagement and leadership of the participating states and stakeholders¹¹⁷. However, this should be the main lesson learnt from the EUSDR, but also from other macro-regional strategies. As underlined by the European Commission, macro-regional strategies need above all a strong leadership that manages and shares the implementation of the strategy. The EUSDR is currently benefiting from a political dynamic and momentum, but in this sense, more ownership from the relevant ministries and more commitment and work from stakeholders to mobilise the necessary resources is urgently needed. It is further important that constant development of visions is happening at all levels involved in the Strategy. Based on the analysis of the reasons for low participation and the results of the implementation of the EUSDR over the last 10 years, several thematic areas have been identified which lead to the following aspects¹¹⁸:

a. Operational aspects

One of the core aspects of organising an EUSDR Steering Group is to define and find the right structure, mix, competences and arrangements, in other words to determine the setup and composition of the Steering Group. In many Priority Areas, the composition of the SG is already explained in the respective Rules of Procedures (RoP) such as the full representation of all participating states for enhancing coherency of the EUSDR. The **Strategy member states and their respective thematic hosting institutions** (e.g. line ministries) are in charge of not only appointing NCs and PACs but also SG Members, hence ensuring appropriate representation of EUSDR states in Steering Group meetings. According to the PAs requirements and RoP, further stakeholders like **civil society representatives, non-governmental organisations, business and economic agents** as well as **members of the research and academia sector** may be invited to SGs in an advisory or observing role. It is of highest importance that the work of the PACs is supported by qualified and engaged experts in the SGs from the Danube states and members of the Steering Group. The issue, of states' mandating of national representatives into Steering Groups (e.g. lacking mandate for decision-making, lacking area of expertise, no sufficient resources) may be addressed by the **High-Level Group (HLG)**. Hence, *"a broader expert involvement (including persons from academia or civil society organisations) could be considered as capacity reinforcement"*¹¹⁹.

Likewise, **other PACs** may *"strive for expanding cross-PA and cross-MRS cooperation"*¹²⁰. It might be of use for **NCs** to be able to participate in SG meetings (as observers), to foster the **trans-national, inter-sectorial and inter-institutional** work of the SG. Therefore, a *"step-by-step empowerment of SGs might*

¹¹⁷ Cf. Metis (2019): 61.

¹¹⁸ The following aspects should present different possibilities in a large comprehensive overview. Some points are more appropriate for stakeholders who have been in the Strategy for a long time, while others may be helpful for new stakeholders in EUSDR, or for a practical exchange between Priority Areas.

¹¹⁹ Metis (2019): 41.

¹²⁰ Danube Strategy Point (2019): EUSDR Consolidated Input Document of the Danube Countries for the Revision of the EUSDR Action Plan, 32. [Online](#).

*be an incentive that MS invest more in strategy-building*¹²¹. Mutual understanding among all members of the Steering Group needs to be built up and it is comprehensible that this is an ongoing process. A broader institutionalised **“participation at local, municipal, regional and national level”**¹²², not only the national level, could also be considered where appropriate, accenting also the regional focus of the Strategy. Especially capitals and large cities from the Danube region might bring valuable inputs for the work of a Steering Group.

The composition of a Steering Group, beyond national representatives, is about attracting representatives from **different fields, experiences, departments/groups for specialist areas and thought**. Stakeholders with **hands-on experience** as well as those with **leadership and administrative skills**. In addition to **established actors** in the Strategy, ‘young’ **professionals** can help convey enthusiasm and new ideas or thought to the SG. Key for success for all Priority Areas is a **competent and motivated** Steering Group, which should be able to **build on their expertise**, should have the **network of contacts** to reach key stakeholders in the respective participating state. Particular attention should be paid to **key driver persons** in the group, in order to conduct meetings in a constructive manner. It has been emphasized *“that PAs are ‘energized’ by the specific/prominent ownership of a ‘core group’, by the active participation of a DG and/or an existing international organisation and/or other factors of involvement and ownership”*¹²³. These factors combined with the right persons of a SG are of high relevance for the success and the (political) momentum of the work of the SG and the EUSDR itself. In some thematic areas, it may also be helpful to involve **external representatives** (e.g. NGOs, Civil society organisation, labour unions, chambers of economy, stakeholder of the academia) in order to **allow new perspectives** and a **broader experience base**.

Another important aspect of the constitution of the Steering Groups is the **size of the consortium**. The challenge with small groups is that few members may not have enough experience and perspectives in and for the Strategy. Oversized groups can suffer from having **too many viewpoints**, as *“a major point is the trade-off between far reaching goals and a very limited number of policy levers. Most of these levers lack effectiveness due to staff fluctuation at level of MS and SGs”*¹²⁴. In addition, an oversized group can sometimes lose its effectiveness by its scale, as meetings can be difficult to arrange and conduct. It is necessary to find the **right mix and size**. The **advantages of a larger group** should be noted, such as the possibility of involving a wider range of (SG) members and thus gaining a **wider range of experience**, especially from external and national sources. This for example can lead to **greater ownership** by the intended Steering Group.

b. Functional aspects

The determination of the tasks and activities of the Steering Groups is no less important as they, together with the PACs, ensure the **implementation of the EUSDR**, for instance by agreeing on planning, with targets, indicators and timetables, and by ensuring contacts between project promoters, programmes and funding sources, and by providing technical assistance and advice. Although their role, capacities, resources and commitment are the key to the success of the strategy, many Steering Groups suffer from a certain lack of continuity and fluctuation of staff (e.g. the change of contact persons on the national level). By building and **strengthening capacities** through the

¹²¹ Metis (2019): 41.

¹²² Metis (2019): 34.

¹²³ Metis (2019): 39.

¹²⁴ Metis (2019): 62.

continuity of staff among the SG members, effective strategy implementation can be achieved. SG members may be **competent in the subject matter** and being **well prepared** through for instance **consultation with other EUSDR actors** and **preparatory meetings** at national level, which may be ensured by the NCs. They should be aware/informed on what happens in their country and act as contact points of the PA in their states. In addition, SG members do not always have the mandate to **act and take decisions**. This issue further needs **to be addressed at the highest level** (NCs and High-Level Group). One approach, for example, could be to foster **stronger rights for participation and control of implementation** by measures to *“simplify or reduce administration for coordination and to invest more in the management”*¹²⁵. **Regular letters from the EC, with support of PACs and the DSP**, to the political level may be beneficial to encourage participation and, where appropriate, updates of SG nominations. If the scope for action of National Coordinators is fully exploited, the EC could also, for instance, contact the respective stakeholders of the missing participating states to ensure their commitment in the Steering Groups.

Another important issue when considering the setup of a EUSDR Steering Group are the terms of reference, or so-called **Rules of Procedures (RoP)**. If the focus of a Priority Area has changed or expanded since the start of the Strategy, or if the objectives and targets have evolved further, consideration may be given to drawing up terms of reference to include the **frequency of SG meetings, reporting procedures** and above all the **roles and responsibilities** of the Steering Group and its members. The focus should be on ensuring the **clarity of individual and Steering Group roles**. To improve the Steering Group, *“clear definitions of the functions and responsibilities of all SG members including PACs could be necessary”*¹²⁶. Generally speaking, it is advisable that PACs cooperate intensively with those SG members that are committed. Moreover, it will hardly be possible to involve SG members in a thematic area if it is not of thematic or political relevance in a state¹²⁷. In addition, the EUSDR member states need to ensure, that **travel budget e.g. for SG meetings** is available. In the future, one could also consider using video conferencing (tools) to some extent, to ensure and to eventually also increase the participation of (all) stakeholders. It may well be the case that for some stakeholders a physical travel is not possible, so that they could be connected via the conference tool. The use of these tools has also proven itself in times when physical travel was not possible (e.g. due to travel restrictions). Conference tools can therefore help to increase participation in Steering Group meetings, not only for those who have a busy schedule, but also for non-EU countries affected by possible non-payment of travel expenses¹²⁸. DSP offers support to EUSDR key stakeholders in organising online meetings via the tools Zoom and Cisco Webex. In addition to that, DSP produced two guides on how to use Zoom and Cisco Webex to organise an online meeting or event.

An update of the Rules of Procedure could help to validate the roles and contribution such as scope, dates and agenda, deadlines, meetings, composition, confidentiality, communication, decision making, voting and reporting, thus encouraging the Steering Group.

Another aspect of the organisation of a Steering Group is the establishment over the **thematic issues covered and activities of a SG**. Different approaches may be considered. In general, the Priority Areas rather cover larger thematic fields with a large number of specific fields of action (e.g. PA 1b Mobility

¹²⁵ Metis (2019): 41.

¹²⁶ Metis (2019): 41 and Annex IV – online survey.

¹²⁷ For example, waterway mobility on the Danube is only relevant for those EUSDR countries that have direct access to the Danube, which would be 10 out of 14.

¹²⁸ Cf. Annex IV – online survey.

with the specific thematic fields of rail, road and air, or PA 7 Knowledge Society with the specific thematic fields of research, education and ICT). It might be useful for a Priority Area to envisage a **thematic concentration** and “to address a smaller number of issues at priority level, which would increase the options for and the probability of visible achievements in a limited number of key areas”¹²⁹. These aspects have also been addressed in the discussions of the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan, and it should be noted that some PAs have consistently narrowed down their areas of interest to allow a more targeted implementation of the EUSDR. The implementation shall then be carried out in **joint projects and actions**, which are considered as “key success factors for a strong involvement of the SG in the PA”¹³⁰. PAs and SG members are expected to know or identify the most important stakeholders and the **existing projects, initiatives, programmes, networks and cross-sectoral contacts** related to their Priority Area, and on the other hand consider preparing **new projects**. Likewise, the PACs and the Steering Groups could decide, for example in the SG meetings, what **kind of projects** they wish to support. Besides the identification of already developed projects, the **clustering and narrowing of ongoing projects** as well as the **follow-up (capitalisation) of completed projects** may be considered as an effective involvement of the SG into the PA. Programmes can also be contacted in advance to obtain **information on approved or completed projects or project ideas**.

In several Priority Areas, the PACs, together with the SG members, issue so-called **EUSDR-labels for strategically relevant projects** in the respective area. This is to be highlighted as a very positive development, as “projects and activities of strategic value are an important tool in the EUSDR for **making results visible**”¹³¹. In these matters, the PACs and the Steering Group may have the **final say on the EUSDR-label and project support**, however even if the tasks are split. Vice versa, their decisions, expertise as well as their objectives and targets can be useful for funding programmes in assessing the relevance and quality of projects.

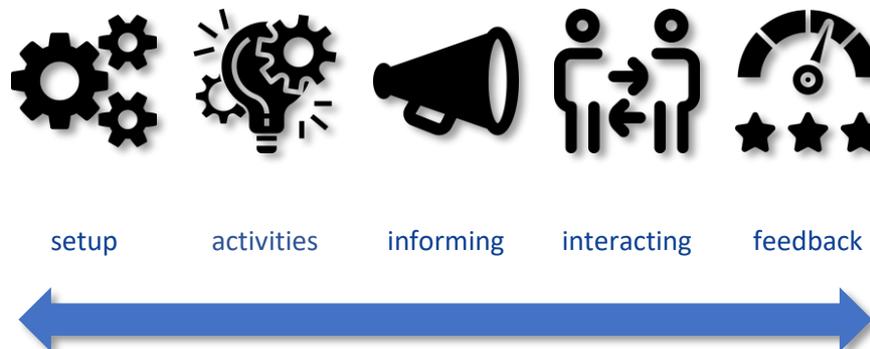


Figure 3: Approaches to engagement.

¹²⁹ Metis (2019): 38.

¹³⁰ Metis (2019): 8.

¹³¹ Metis (2019): 46.

c. Executive aspects

In this chapter, the executive aspects of organizing Steering Group meetings will be examined. Most EUSDR stakeholders have been conducting their Steering Group meetings for several years now and therefore know exactly which aspects they need to focus on and which points may be less relevant. Therefore, this chapter will only briefly present the three aspects of organizing SG Meetings in preparation, on site and in the follow-up. A detailed description of the three aspects mentioned can be found in **Annex III**.

One challenge in organising SG meetings is certainly, as already described, that many SG members already have busy schedules with their daily work and even apart from attending the actual Steering Group meetings, so they have limited time to get involved with the SG. It may therefore be important to determine in advance of a SG meeting the common goals or purpose, appropriate resources and understanding of the group and work processes of the meeting. These parameters are described in more detail in **I. Pre-meeting** and could help the SG members to understand what is expected of them while helping them to work efficiently.

Chapter **II. On-site meeting** then gives examples of how the members of the Steering Group can be actively involved at the actual meeting in order to make them feel valued, encourage them and thus facilitate the success of the meeting. Several possible measures are highlighted, such as the setup of an appropriate (infra)structure and the support of external entities and individuals for a well-organised meeting.

A good Steering Group meeting can produce good outcomes such as deeper questions, smart ideas, and possibly a useful distance or perspective for advancing SG topics. Chapter **III. Follow-up meeting** will therefore focus on how these good results can be collected and processed. Based on this chapter, the following graph shows a possible checklist for the organisation of Steering Group meetings.

Figure 4: Example checklist for SG meetings



ANNEXES

- I. Template of Steering Group member lists
- II. Overview of Priority Area Rules of Procedures (RoP)
- III. Executive aspects of organising Steering Group meetings
- IV. Improving capacities and enhancing participation (online survey)

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