



The 10th Annual **FORUM** of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

26-27 October 2021,
Bratislava & online

TOWARDS A GREEN AND DIGITAL DANUBE REGION

REPORT COMPILED BY THE DANUBE STRATEGY POINT

The 10th EUSDR Annual Forum, jointly organised by the Slovak Republic, the European Commission, the Danube Transnational Programme and with support of the Danube Strategy Point, took place on 26-27 October 2021. The EUSDR Annual Forum took place in a hybrid format: Organisers and presenting participants (panellists and speakers) were physically present in Bratislava, from where the entire Annual Forum was streamed. Speakers presented their presentations online and registered online participants had the opportunity to interactively participate in discussions through an online platform.

DAY 1: 26 October 2021

10:00 – 12:00	Reflections and Discussion of the 8th Danube Participation Day on the topic of Digitalisation & Participation - Putting people at the centre of the digital transition
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Back to back with the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum on 25 and 26 October 2021, the [8th Danube Participation Day](#) was dedicated to “**Participation & Digitalisation**”. The conference addressed participatory decision-making and co-design of public services in view of digitalisation and eGovernment. The event was co-organised by the Danube Civil Society Forum and EUSDR PA 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation.

Stefan Lütgenau (Danube Civil Society Forum) welcomed the participants and introduced the agenda of the day.

Claudia Singer (Coordinator of EUSDR Priority Area 10) provided the participants with a recap of the 1st day of DPD during which the **four areas of digitalisation in connection to participation** were discussed: 1) open government and transparency, 2) co-designing policies, 3) trust in e-government and 4) accessibility and skills, taking a closer look at the challenges and possible solutions. On open government, models for both urban and rural areas were discussed, as there is no universal model to be applied, also considering the diversity of the Danube Region. In respect to co-designing policies and participatory budgeting, a discussion was held on best practices and criteria that public authorities need to fulfill in order to implement such processes. Building trust is a very important step and in this respect, the designated panel discussed the methods used for trustbuilding and also the needed technologies and data usage. Necessary accessibility and skills need to be considered when providing e-services, as well as the fact that digital and media literacy are now crucial to democracy. The legal standards in security contribute to both accessibility but also trust building and need to be included in these legal and administrative processes. The scope of the 2nd day of the DPD was to put the vision for a digital Danube Region in the spotlight.

Stefan Lütgenau (Danube Civil Society Forum) announced that the main objective of the next interventions was to bridge the already identified aspects of digitalisation with the macro-regional perspective and introduced the panelists: **Iva Taralezhkova** (Chairperson of the Board of the Citizens Participation Forum Bulgaria), **Andreea Pena** (Capacity Building Officer at the Danube Strategy Point) and **Tomáš Jucha** (Director, Department of Innovative Technologies and International Cooperation, Digital Agenda, Section at the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization, Slovak Republic).

The discussion was guided along three main topics that the panelists answered, referring to:

- **digitalisation by 2030 in the Danube Region,**
- **main aspects and challenges that need to be tackled to ensure better participation of citizens and businesses and**
- **the contribution of macro-regional strategies to the improvement of participation and digitalisation.**

Iva Taralezhkova (Citizens Participation Forum, Bulgaria) underlined that digitalisation is everywhere from the individual to the national and macro-regional level. By 2030, a great part of the communication between citizens and authorities is to be digitalised. Therefore, **capacity building** should become a systematic approach also at the level of **public authorities**; the introduction of standards that allow for **accessibility and legitimisation of e-participation** and last but not least motivation: motivation, information and pro-active attitude in involving a broad audience, especially young people, in discussing public issues. One of the very important contributions of macro-regional

strategies is in the development of common standards and guidelines for efficient, transparent and fair use of digital tools.

Andreea Pena (DSP) pointed out that the future developments and goals set for the Danube Region are in line with EU policies. The digital compass for the **EU Digital Decade** revolves around the 4 cardinal points: skills, infrastructures, business and government. The main goal for connectivity in the Digital Decade is for every European household to have access to high-speed internet coverage by 2025 and gigabit connectivity by 2030. Ideally, in 2030 the Danube Region will have harmonised rules for connectivity services, so all its inhabitants enjoy the same benefits no matter where they are located. Therefore, by 2030 the Danube Region will not only be much more connected and interconnected, but more resilient. In the future, digitally empowered and capable citizens (be it old or young) will be able to take advantage of the opportunities of the Digital Decade, therefore the digital transition must be systematic and inclusive, managing the shift from traditional analogue professions to digital ones by providing the necessary skills and knowledge. Democratic life and public services online by 2030 must be fully accessible for everyone, and everyone must benefit from a best-in-class digital environment providing for **easy-to-use, efficient and personalised services and tools with high security and privacy standards**. Government as a (digital) platform is the new way of building digital public services (so-called eGovernance). Innovation and creativity are also key inputs for a smooth and successful transition. Digitalisation and even more so the digital transition bring both challenges and new opportunities; therefore cooperation and exchange among the Danube Region countries will be crucial to avoid increasing disparities and regional divide. The EUSDR Consolidated Input, that served as basis for the new **EUSDR Action Plan** & the Action Plan itself define digitalisation as one of the two **horizontal frames** relevant for all five strategic objectives to be implemented across the 12 Priority Areas. When looking at the EUSDR actions and targets, digitalisation is envisaged in all 4 Pillars and 12 Priority Areas. More details and practical examples are available in the digital brochure that was just launched, shared via the [#EUSDR10 social media campaign](#) and the [smart app](#) developed by the DSP.

Tomáš Jucha (Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization, Slovak Republic) explained that digital solutions must be used efficiently by authorities, companies and civil society, putting together both European and national policies for a balanced society, considering all relevant aspects and particularities. Important aspects that need to be tackled include the need for a well-developed digital infrastructure, building **abilities to learn and develop digital skills in a dynamic environment and the focus on economy to support SMEs to become digital and competitive**. The EUSDR Action Plan offers the possibilities and opportunities for sharing experience and practical approaches for all Danube Region countries to build a more connected and respectful society. Via common cooperation we can build stronger and more resilient societies, business environment and public administration.

Igor Studennikov (Centre for Regional Studies, Ukraine) appreciated that the involvement of Ukraine in the EUSDR, including the EUSDR chairmanship 2022, represents an opportunity for further development of civil society and multi-level collaboration at both national and macro-regional level. The **Ukrainian civil society and expert community** have been **involved in the development of the Ukrainian Presidency priorities** addressing sustainable development of the Danube Region by decarbonisation and green transformation and the development of human capital and labour markets. In 2011, the Ukrainian Presidency of the ICPDR was successful, among other factors due to the involvement of civil society and the expert community. Currently, Ukraine also holds the Presidency of the Danube Commission. The Ukrainian civil society has the knowledge and experience to support the Ukrainian Presidency of the EUSDR.

10:00 – 12:00 Meeting of EUSDR ministers responsible for innovation and digitalisation

During the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum, the Joint Meeting of Ministers responsible for Innovation and Digitalisation of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region took place. As a result of the meeting a [joint declaration](#) was adopted, which deals with the issues of digitalisation and digital transformation and their relevance for a better and more focused use of Cohesion Policy funds and the significance for transnational cooperation including COVID-19 recovery measures.

13:00 – 13:45 Opening of the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum

Veronika Remišová (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation of the Slovak Republic) welcomed all participants to the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum and highlighted the EUSDR as a great platform for sharing expertise and cooperation.

Subsequently, the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum was officially opened by **Eduard Heger** (Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic), who welcomed all participants physically and online and emphasised the benefits of regional and transnational cooperation. Macro-regional strategies (MRS) play an **important role in the area of EU enlargement** and connecting EU Member States and non-EU Member States to jointly address current challenges, such as the green and digital transformation or the COVID-19 pandemic. It is highly appreciated that Ukraine is the first non-EU country to take over the EUSDR Presidency and the Slovak Republic is determined to provide support whenever needed. Regional cooperation offers great opportunity – for the benefit of all citizens.

Elisa Ferreira (Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, European Commission) underlined current challenges and at the same time considerable steps forward accomplished in the past 10 years, including digitalisation and Europe's cooperation in tackling the COVID-19 crisis. To quote the EC's President von der Leyen: "Whatever the challenge, less cooperation is not the answer!" This makes the EUSDR more relevant than ever. In the coming months and years, Commissioner Ferreira considers **three crucial areas for cooperation**: 1) innovation and digital transition, 2) the European Green Deal and 3) the embedding of the Strategy in European and national funds. She thanked all who have worked together to set up this system, for the work that has been done, and wished the incoming UA Presidency all the best.

Ladislav Miko (European Commission, Head of Representation in Slovak Republic,) highlighted the good relations, trust and progress of the countries of the Danube Region. Innovation and youth policies are among the main topics of the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum and also high priority of the EC. The European Green Deal is another priority, and to make it a success, **local actors need to be involved**. Civil society and young people are motors of these initiatives, they should be empowered and involved from the beginning on, in every single step of implementation. While there still remains work to be done in order to deliver on the vision of a macro-region where no one lags behind, the Danube Region can be a good example for the rest of Europe in tackling these challenges.

Andreja Metelko-Zgombić (State Secretary for Europe, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Republic of Croatia) stated that presiding over a multinational, multi-dimensional structure such as the EUSDR is a great responsibility and thanked Slovakia for its strong performance as well as the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) for their dedication and work. The **Strategy is proof of a joint, continual effort, with the aim of creating a region with better living standards for everyone**. She underlined the importance of a proper implementation of macro-regional objectives through EU funding programmes and the 'Next Generation EU' as an instrument for recovery and resilience. Metelko-

Zgombić concluded her speech with valuing the contribution of the EUSDR to extend cohesion effects beyond the formal EU borders and wished Ukraine a successful Presidency.

Igor Korkhovyi (Deputy Minister for EU integration at the Ministry for Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine) thanked everybody for the support and emphasised that cooperation is one of the most important factors that determine the future of Europe. The EUSDR provides a great opportunity for deepening and strengthening cooperation. MRS cooperation is one of the main pillars of Ukraine for the next 7 years and a chance to accelerate security and prosperity for citizens.

14:00 – 15:00 Plenary Session

Ján Budaj (Minister of Environment of the Slovak Republic) emphasised the need to cooperate, especially in areas such as biodiversity protection, water and forest management, acknowledging that the Danube river is a huge opportunity for the Danube area and at the same time a huge responsibility.

Normunds Popen (Deputy Director-General, DG REGIO, European Commission) underlined that the two main themes of the Annual Forum, the green transition and digitalisation are connected and interdependent. He invited the relevant stakeholders from the Danube Region to make use of Cohesion Policy resources as well as the Just Transition Fund. Popen also highlighted various key processes within the EUSDR such as the embedding process, involving youth (2022 being the European Year of Youth) and facilitating the involvement of partners from EU neighbouring countries.

Anita Fürstenberg-Lucius (Director of Lending Operations in Central and South Eastern Europe, European Investment Bank) spoke about the European Investment Bank support in green transition and digitalisation, supporting projects from the Danube Region with approx. 6-7 billion euros annually. For the next period the European Investment Bank will focus on embracing the green revolution and becoming the Climate Bank.

Miroslav Vesko (DG Joint Research Centre/JRC, European Commission) expressed the support given by the JRC to the EUSDR activities, highlighting its support as concerns the green-digital nexus, Smart Specialisation Strategies for sustainability, the New European Bauhaus, the EU Digital Decade (“A new set of digital targets for 2030”), the Digital Education Action Plan and the JRC support of youth involvement and capacity building.

15:00 – 15:30 Break

15:30 – 17:30 Danube Transnational Programme Annual Event

The session was dedicated to the Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) and was organised in two parts: The first part focused on **presenting the history and continuum of the programme**, starting from its early format as CADSES programme (Central, Adriatic, Danubian and South-Eastern European Space), through the SEE programme (South-East Europe), followed by the Danube Transnational Programme 1, focusing on how the programme was adapting to an ever changing reality and responding to the needs of the region, e.g. with adaptations of content to the regional needs or with the inclusion of at the time so-called CARDS countries (*Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation*) - a pioneer enterprise of shared management of IPA funds. The second part of the session was dedicated to the 2021-2027 programme.

Jean Pierre Halkin (Head of Unit Competence Centre Macro-Regions and Territorial Cooperation, DG REGIO, European Commission) underlined the importance of the Green Deal as vision for the future of Europe and also the urgency of actions in this respect to **preserve ecosystems and become carbon neutral**. The social pillar has been at the heart of the Cohesion Policy from the start and there is tremendous progress in this respect so far in all Member States but special attention needs to be given to existing disparities. Therefore, the success of the **Green Deal** can only be guaranteed by the involvement of citizens and especially young people. Halkin appreciated the support given by the Danube Transnational Programme to the Strategy, especially regarding the EUSDR governance. He also underlined that each region is to identify the best solution for the implementation of the Green Deal adapted to its needs and particularities. The collaboration between the programme and the Strategy is essential for the success of both. Both contribute to the support of the 5 non-EU Members States in the enlargement process. Cooperation, both political and scientific, is at the heart of Interreg programmes and is the central ingredient for addressing future challenges, for the success of the Danube Region and its economy.

Imre Csalagovics (Head of DTP MA) gave an overview of transnational cooperation in the Danube Region, underlining the importance of several aspects: geographical influence, changes in policy implementation at EU level and the EU integration process. The internationality of the Danube Region is determined by the number of countries that share the basin. Until now, 5 transnational cooperation programmes have been established in this region: 2 CADSES programmes (1996-2000, 2001-2006), the South East Europe programme (2007-2013), the current and the future Danube Transnational Programmes (2014-2020 and 2021-2027). The **new Danube Transnational Programme 2021-2027 is based on an extensive territorial analysis** which identifies current needs and challenges and it takes into consideration past and emerging trends: on the one handside environmental, economic and governance challenges still remain, on the other handside, social challenges are emerging and require joint actions of the Danube Region countries. The launch of the first call is expected for spring 2022.

Gusztav Csomor (Project Officer, DTP) showcased the continuous cooperation in the region in the field of **environment** by explaining the connection between a series of projects implemented within the transnational programmes mentioned before (CADSES, SEE, DTP) either addressing the same geographical area of the region or different perspectives of the same topic.

Horst Schindler (Project Officer, DTP) presented a series of projects implemented in the field of **transport and energy** in the CADSES, SEE and DTP programmes, having as common starting point the EU Water Framework Directive and the necessity to develop harmonised standards and approaches in river management systems and services.

Johannes Gabriel (Project Officer, DTP) gave an overview of cooperation in the field of **governance**. The showcased transnational projects addressed the field of demographic change, migration and brain drain and demonstrated the relevance of social topics for transnational cooperation. Moreover, such projects were involved in capitalisation activities proving the importance of coordinative activities in the region.

In the next session, the representatives of the DTP Joint Secretariat (Katalin Kovacs- Kasza, Horst Schindler, Gustav Csomor, Steven Halligan and Johannes Gabriel) presented the **funding opportunities** to be offered in the 2021-2027 period by the Danube Transnational Programme by introducing the priority areas and specific objectives agreed by the partner countries and that are to be followed.

Priority Area	Specific Objectives
A smarter Danube Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SO. 1.1. Enhancing innovation and technology transfer in the Danube Region SO. 1.2. Development of skills for advancing smart specialisation, industrial transformation and transition towards industry 4.0, including cross sectorial collaborations

A greener, low-carbon Danube Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SO. 2.1. Promoting renewable energy • SO.2.2. Promoting climate change adaptation in the Danube Region and disaster management on transnational level in relation to environmental risks (taking into account eco-system based approaches) • SO. 2.3. Promoting integrated transnational water and sediment management in the Danube River Basin, ensuring good quality and quantity of waters and sediment balance • SO.2.4. Protecting and preserving the biodiversity in ecological corridors and eco-regions of transnational relevance in the Danube Region
A more social Danube Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SO.3.1 Accessible, inclusive and effective labour markets • SO.3.2. Accessible and inclusive quality services in education, training and lifelong learning • SO.3.3. Socio-economic development through heritage, culture and tourism
A better cooperation governance in the Danube Region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SO.4.1. Increased institutional capacities for territorial macro regional governance • SO.4.2. Support to the EUSDR Governance including direct support for Priority Area Coordinators, the funding of the Danube Strategy Point and the seed money/ small project fund facility

Simona Ene (Head of DTP JS) underlined that the next Danube Transnational Programme has fully embedded the EUSDR objectives, tackles existing and emergent challenges of the region and lays the ground for future investments targeted at projects to reach a leverage effect in the region. The first call for proposals is to be expected in spring 2022. A kick-off event is to be organised in April 2022.

DAY 2: 27 October 2021

09:30 – 11:00 Parallel sessions

Session I THE ROLE OF YOUTH AND YOUTH POLICIES IN THE EUSDR

“Youth is our future, youth is our present - it is here, it is now and young people have to be taken seriously and should be involved in decision making processes”, is how **Iryna Gumenchuk** opened the session. She introduced the project [Danube Youth Network](#), financed by the State Ministry Baden-Württemberg, which has been implemented by five EUSDR countries in cooperation with EUSDR Priority Areas 9 and 10. The Danube Youth Network (DYN) focuses on fostering youth participation, sustainability, empowerment and social inclusion in the Danube Region. DYN’s aim is to be effectively managed by young professionals with different backgrounds through a transparent bottom-up process supporting, connecting and building capacities of youth in the Danube Region.

In the framework of the project and against the odds of COVID-19 many youth workshops were organised and the [Shoot by youth](#) video competition was launched. This competition encouraged young people, between 15 and 25 years old, to identify local challenges and create first local projects to tackle these challenges. A major lesson learned is that proficiency in the use of social media is vital – sensitivity to fast paced trends in communication is key. One of the most important services provided by the project is youth exchange and mentoring: They push young people in their personal development and in building transnational friendships, which facilitates learning about other cultures. Having arrived at the end of the Danube Youth Network project, project partners are now

committed to institutionale the network in a way that works for young people as well as for the EUSDR and all institutions involved.

Michal Blaško (Slovak EUSDR Presidency) proceeded to introduce the concept for youth involvement in the Danube Region Strategy as initiated under the Slovak EUSDR Presidency in 2021, which suggest to establish a **Danube Youth Council (DYC)** and a **Network of Danube Youth Organisations (DNYO)**. The DYC shall serve as advisory body integrated in the EUSDR governance and made up by young individual members living in the Danube Region. The DNYO shall serve as an open network of youth organisations for exchange of experience. The next steps in the implementation of these two bodies will be the adaptation and endorsement by EUSDR National Coordinators and securing and financial backup for both bodies.

Astrid Aulnette (Communication Officer for Interreg & MRS, DG REGIO) further introduced the [Manifesto for Young People by Young People to Shape the European Cooperation Policy](#), which was elaborated on the occasion of the Interreg 30 years anniversary in 2020. Digitalisation is one of the means to involve young people in decision making processes on EU level and this is how young people can be reached. After one year of Youth Manifesto action, 1) young people have systematically been involved in EC organised events, 2) the EUSALP Youth Council was founded, 3) a communication campaign towards young people has been implemented and 4) and young people participated in the Interreg Volunteer Youth 2021-2027 programme drafting. However, further actions are planned, such as 1) the labelling of inivitatives for the European Year of Youth 2022, 2) launching targeted calls for young people in the 2021-2027 period and 3) opening MRS Monitoring Committees to young people. Young people don't only want to benefit from projects, they also want to implement them and MRS are pioneers of youth involvement in this. In this sense, the upcoming European Year of Youth 2022 will certainly have plenty of highlights.

On behalf of **EUSDR Priority Are 9**, **Sarah Fellner** gave an overview of the PA 9 activities carried out in the past 10 years to promote young people in the Danube Region, ranging from education and training, labour market and inclusion of marginalised communities. PA 9 promotes exchange on best practices and policies on these issues by organising meetings and conferences which bring together experts and stakeholders from the Danube Region. PA 9 aims at making sure that young people develop digital and green skills, the vocational **education and training** is strengthened and early school leaving is reduced. Furthermore, PA 9 facilitates the development of projects between teachers and schools in the DR. In these projects young people don't only gain hard skills but also key intercultural skills. Education and training are central to empowerment of young people, teaching civic competences to participate actively in democratic life and to address challenges such as discrimination etc.

Jörg Mirtl (Priority Area 9) further elaborated on the four central PA activities to **support young people on the labour market** in the Danube Region: 1) cooperation in labour market policies, 2) digitalisation at work, 3) integration of vulnerable groups such as the Roma community and 4) political fight against poverty and promotion of social inclusion. These actions are tackled on various levels, such as policy coordination and programming (e.g. within the network of ESF Managing Authorities).

What capacities do we need to build good governance to support young people in the Danube Region? **Claudia Singer** (Priority Area 10) introduced the PA 10 [Guidance Paper for Youth Participation](#) – the result of a multistage consultation process spanning over two years.

The paper clarifies how young people might benefit from participating in MRS and the Danube Region Strategy specifically: This includes access to information, funding, the realistion of their ideas, the possibility to engage in transnational decision making. Young people want to engage in decision making but they lack the arenas for decision making. Furthermore, a more intergenerational decision making process could bring about a cultural shift spilling over from MRS to other policy arenas. The paper foresees youth participation within the EUSDR in three arenas of intervention: capacity

building, communication and cooperation. In this sense, investments are needed in capacity building, trainings for empowerment and leadership skills, media and digital literacy. Different channels of communication have to be taken into account, too – where are young people, from where do they communicate, which kind of dialogue and language is needed? As for cooperation, it has to be considered how formalised dialogue has to be, also in terms of funding – can we provide suitable resources for young people to engage meaningfully?

Matthias Holzner (NC Baden-Württemberg, State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg) addressed the challenges of engaging youth in decision making and regional development processes and presented the **Danube.YouthSalon** as one format tackling this challenge. The Danube.YouthSalon held in September and October 2021 aimed at young people developing ideas for the Conference on the Future of Europe, engaging 260 online participants from all 14 Danube Region countries in three online meetings and resulting in proposals towards the Conference on the Future of Europe which were introduced to politicians and EC representatives at an onsite Danube.YouthSalon event in Berlin in October 2021. This process showed that personal connections and recommendations are important to attract a non-professional audience; involving young citizens requires resources and perseverance and trusted networks to reach young people matter.

Robert Lichtner (Danube Strategy Point) and **Dorota Korcynska** (DG REGIO) once more underlined that young people need access to networks and governance structures to participate in decision making processes. The DYC and DNYO offer this and complement the variety of already existing initiatives. The inputs of this discussion at the 10th EUSDR Annual Forum will be integrated in the concept for the establishment of a Danube Youth Council. The topic of youth involvement will continue to be high on the EUSDR agenda in the framework of the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency 2021-2022. The **upcoming Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency (Alla Kinshak)** confirmed and underlined this. Youth participation is not an end in itself, but a means of achieving positive change in the lives of young people and building a prosperous Danube Region. Next to the support of young people via the EUSDR, the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency also shared that in 2020/2021 a new paradigm of state youth policy was formed in Ukraine - from "work with youth" to "youth participation" covering the **approval of the National Youth Strategy until 2030** and the adoption of the **Law of Ukraine "On Basic Principles of Youth Policy"** aiming at conditions for self-realisation and development of youth potential in Ukraine, fostering independence and competitiveness and ensuring active participation of youth in social life. In this sense, all sails are set towards the support of youth in the Danube Region in 2022, the [European Year of Youth](#).

Session II **DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND INNOVATIONS**

Zuzana Nehajová (2impact, Slovakia) welcomed the participants and highlighted the role of digital transformations and innovation in shaping the future of the Danube Region.

Gerd Meier zu Köcker (Cluster Agency Baden-Württemberg) introduced new initiatives to support value chain resilience in the Danube Region. Recently conducted studies revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted companies in the same sector in the same region differently. Furthermore, the expert highlighted the need to **better understand the nature of value chains and to develop value chain-oriented support schemes**. The initiatives developed in response to the identified needs are the Innovation Express Scheme and the Danube Alliance for SME Competitiveness. The second initiative aims to support small and medium enterprises to become embedded in more resilient value chains by connecting supply with demand. The initiative is funded by the Baden-Württemberg State Ministry and it is open to all partners across the Danube Region.

Judit Schrick-Szenczi (Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism, Baden-Württemberg, EUSDR Priority Area 8 Coordinator) elaborated on the role of the **EUSDR Priority Area 8 Working Groups (Innovation and Technology Transfer, Clusters and Regional Development, Artificial Intelligence, Digital Danube, Women Entrepreneurship)** in supporting the digital transformations and innovations. Schrick-Szenczi also introduced the Innovation Express 2021 initiative, which represents a joint initiative for supporting the four macro-regional strategies of the European Union. A **synchronised call was launched in May 2021**, focusing on topics such as Artificial Intelligence in life science applications and digital solutions for a sustainable industry.

Grit Ackermann (Head of Project Department, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia) informed the participants on the objectives and expected results of the project **CINEMA – Creative Industries for New Urban Economies in the Danube Region**, funded by the Danube Transnational Programme. Among others, the project aims at strengthening innovation capacity by establishing a Creative Industry Support Centre and at revitalising city centre locations by supporting new store and business concepts in cross-fertilisation with creative industry. Municipalities, small and medium enterprises and business support infrastructure are the beneficiaries of this project. There is an increased potential of cross-sectoral cooperation with different sectors, such as tourism.

Alexandru Marin (Professor at University Politehnica Bucharest) presented ongoing and future activities performed under the **RESTART_4Danube project**, also funded by the Danube Transnational Programme. As cities face challenges to develop a culture that generates **public/private synergies** to promote SMEs and stimulate creative urban communities, the project focuses on supporting quadruple helix partnerships to develop new types of governance and public policies in an innovative approach combining tandems and follower cities. Policy related and operational tools (the RESTART_4Danube Common Strategy on Creative Urban Regeneration, local action plans, cooperation agreements between enterprises and R&D institutions, training toolkits) are envisaged to further improve the innovation capacities of SMEs in the Danube Region.

Ralitsa Zhekova (Executive Director at Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovations Varna) highlighted the results of the DTP project **WOMEN IN BUSINESS - Fostering Young Women Entrepreneurship in the Danube Region**: one transnational and nine national studies on the needs and barriers that young women entrepreneurs face, a transnational study on the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for female entrepreneurs and an analysis of the policies and legislative framework in the field. Moreover, centres for women entrepreneurship were established at four universities in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result of the activities developed within the project, changes in policy agenda are also foreseen.

Finally, on behalf of EUSDR Priority Area 7 – Knowledge Society, **Gabriela Mezeiová** (Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information) emphasised the interlinkages between EUSDR Priority Areas and explained the multifaceted impacts of the projects the **Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information** is involved in (IT Academy, DRIVEN-Enhancing skills and competences to boost ecological innovation in automotive industry, RoboCoop – Robotics Education driven by Interregional Cooperation, HubIT, CE-Responsible Altruistic Entrepreneur).

11:00 – 11:30 Break

11:30 – 13:00 Parallel sessions

Session I

BIODIVERSITY – THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Florian Ballnus (Coordinator of EUSDR Priority Area 6 - To preserve biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils) provided a general overview on the topic of biodiversity preservation and on the work undertaken by EUSDR Priority Area 6 to preserve biodiversity. The **current threats to biodiversity in the Danube Region** are climate change, loss of biodiversity, landscape fragmentation, soil degradation and pollution as well as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, joint action is needed to prepare the Danube Region for a sustainable future. In this respect three defining objectives were established: protection and enhancing biodiversity as green backbone of the EUSDR, fostering **ecological connectivity and green infrastructure** within the EUSDR and across all EU macro-regions and ensuring transnational habitat connection in the Danube Region. In order to achieve these objectives a wide variety of stakeholders, grouped in Task Forces are involved in developing and implementing activities focused on facilitating the green transition in the Danube Region. Considering the existing threats and the given opportunities on policy level, EUSDR Priority Areas 6 translates and transforms policy frameworks into concrete activities and by this contributes to implementing EU policies.

Miroslava Cierna-Plassmann (CEO World Wide Fund for Nature Slovakia) emphasised the opportunities for biodiversity in Slovakia. **Three main fields of action** were identified, namely: protection of **forests, freshwater ecosystem protection and wildlife**; efforts are dedicated to project implementation as well as raising awareness on the importance of biodiversity protection. For example, the project CLIMAFORCEE is focusing on fostering transition to climate-smart forestry management. Decreasing pressure on the forests requires the development of joint solutions, so to close the knowledge gaps, to apply modern education and production methods.

Kerstin Böck (Project Manager at World Wild Fund for Nature Austria) informed the audience on the recent approval by UNESCO of the first **5-Country Biosphere Reserve Mura-Drava-Danube**, the largest coherent river protected area in Europe. It represents a flagship initiative for joint understanding and regional cooperation on a green vision, which requires further attention for better preserving the biodiversity assets. Therefore, transnational projects, such as Amazon of Europe Bike Trail, coop MDD and LIFELINEMDD (Protecting and restoring ecological connectivity in the Mura-Drava-Danube river corridor through cross-sectoral cooperation) are developed and implemented.

Monika Chrenková (DAPHNE - Institute of Applied Ecology Bratislava) elaborated on the results of the CITY NATURE project, which aimed at increasing awareness of biodiversity conservation in the cross-border region spanning between Vienna and Bratislava. Within the framework of the project, a common methodology to support grassland biodiversity and a common methodology to monitor target indicator species were produced and implemented in two pilot areas in Vienna and Bratislava. Citizens and local companies were involved in each stage of the project and environmental education programmes were elaborated and implemented.

Zlatica Csontos Šimoňáková (Senior Officer at Ministry of Environment of the Slovak Republic) introduced several projects for nature conservation and **ecological connectivity** implemented in the **Danube-Carpathian region**: DANUBEparksCONNECTED, TRANSGREEN, ConnectGREEN, SaveGREEN, DaRe to Connect – D2C. These projects prove that some of the prerequisites for sustainable environmental changes are strong multi-level partnerships, a cross-sectoral trans-disciplinary approach, trust building and strong political support.

Evangelia Tzika (DG MARE, European Commission) informed the public on the ***Mission Restore our Ocean and Waters***. It is one of the five European Missions recently developed as new ways to bring concrete solutions to some European and global challenges and deliver concrete results by 2030. Its main objectives refer to protection and restoration of marine and freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity in line with the **EU Biodiversity Strategy**, preventing and eliminating pollution in line with the Zero Pollution Action Plan and making sustainable blue economy climate neutral and circular in line with the EU Climate Law. One of the expected outputs of the mission is the Danube River Basin lighthouse. This initiative supported by Horizon Europe should focus on developing and deploying solutions to protect and restore the Danube Region and its tributaries.

Session II **SUPPORT TO NON-EU STATES & ECONOMIC AND INVESTMENT PLAN FOR WESTERN BALKANS**

Robert Lichtner (Coordinator, Danube Strategy Point) welcomed all participants to the session dedicated to the support of non-EU states and the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans (WB) and highlighted that macro-regional strategies (MRS) play a crucial role therein, as they bring together **EU member states and neighbouring countries** on an equal footing. With a focus on cooperation for creating an area of regional stability, security and prosperity, **MRS** such as the EUSDR, in which the Western Balkan countries play an important role, **are bridges between the EU and local policy-making**. In the past 10 years, the EUSDR has evolved as a functioning policy and cooperation framework that can significantly promote the implementation of regionally/nationally agreed processes on the ground as well as in terms of larger and overarching initiatives such as the EIP for the WB. Several EU initiatives in non-EU countries and the WB were discussed in the following panel.

Michael Voegelé (Deputy Head of the Unit Western Balkans Regional Programmes, Economic Investment Plan, DG NEAR, European Commission) highlighted the EIP objectives with a focus on the COVID-19 recovery of the region and the goal of regional economic cooperation and trade. In this respect, further emphasis is put on **fighting corruption and creating a competitive business environment**, e.g. through sufficient funding possibilities. The Economic and Investment Plan identifies 10 investment flagship initiatives in **six key areas for economic development**, such as sustainable transport and energy connectivity, the green and digital transformation, strengthening the competitiveness of the private sector and support to health, education and social protection, including a youth guarantee to create job opportunities for young people. When asked, how the **EUSDR could facilitate** the implementation of the **EIP in the WB** and bring added value to the key investment flagships, he stressed that the key investment flagships do not stand alone, but are in line with the overall operational EU framework. In relation to the EUSDR, for example, it is the link in the areas of transport, energy connectivity, climate and environmental issues or social welfare.

Regional policy is an important factor in addressing challenges that both non-EU countries and the enlarged European Union face, be it uneven development of regions, urban development, restructuring of rural areas, rehabilitation of areas affected by industrial decline and natural disasters like floods or other consequences of global climate change. **Elina Hakonen-Meddings** (Deputy Head of Unit REGIO D.1 Macro-regions, Transnational/Interregional/External Cooperation, Enlargement, DG REGIO, European Commission) underlined in this respect that MRS provide a unique tool for cooperation, as they are set up and implemented on a voluntary basis. Furthermore, **MRS** offer a **large policy framework** that provides a huge opportunity to **learn from each other** and to exchange and cooperate on equal footing and among equal partners. In strengthening the cohesion of the Danube Region, an important element are the **EUSDR networks of the ERDF/CF and IPA/NDICI managing and programming authorities** that allow a targeted embedding of the topics of the Strategy into the EU programmes. The benefits for non-EU countries also derive from the

implementation of projects and processes, be it thematically related to climate change or business support, as these activities bring added value to the region from which all can learn. It is now a matter of bringing the EIP for the WB and all these different instruments together.

Mihajilo Dašić (Acting Assistant Minister at the Ministry of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia) shed light on the impact of cooperation within the EUSDR on the national level of **Serbia**, reflecting the **assistance and guidance in the country's EU integration process**. In the last ten years of EUSDR implementation, relevant institutions in Serbia such as ministries, academia, businesses and development agencies highlighted that EUSDR cooperation was worthwhile and capacities were improved through knowledge exchange and innovative tools. The region also faces great challenges in the EU integration process while having ambitious climate targets set in the pressuring time of the COVID-19 pandemic situation and recovery. Various initiatives such as the revised EU enlargement methodology are welcomed to better steer the accession process and to bring impetus to the negotiations. The EUSDR can complement these processes in helping the institutions to benchmark best practises, **exchange knowledge and capacities with EU and non-EU Member States to improve policies in the accession process**. Above that, the EIP for the WB is thematically covered by the EUSDR and allows for concrete joint actions and projects funded by the European Union.

Harald Stranzl (Ambassador, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Austria, Austrian National Coordinator for EUSDR) elaborated on the question of how the „older“ EU Member States can benefit from the enlargement of the EU (WB) and what can be learned for the WB countries: “Older” participating countries like Austria can benefit in multiple ways and thematic areas. These areas include security, economic opportunities and Cohesion Policy and harmonising the human potential of the people in the Danube Region. In the course of the previous enlargement processes, Austria moved regionally, economically, human capital wise, scientifically, academia related from the margin to the centre of EU and benefited tremendously from the multilateral cooperation structures established therein. Multilateral beneficial cooperation is exemplified by the relevant Priority Areas. The **WB is a gateway to the Middle East and Asia**, also in terms of targeted investments by various actors. Therefore, the EU has a strong interest in involving the Danube Region countries as partner countries and close cooperation stakeholders. In Austria, the enlargement process is anticipated through various initiatives such as the stronger involvement in EU policies together with Slovakia and the Czech Republic and equal cooperation in EU programmes like Horizon Europe.

Hrvoje Butković (Senior Research Associate at the Zagreb Institute for Development and International Relations/IRMO) presented the **importance of a clear accession perspective for WB countries** from a public, non-profit, scientific and policy research institute perspective. The accession process of Croatia in 2013 is considered as a success in harmonising the legislation with the *acquis communautaire*, with the unique fact that by that time only one country joined the EU having new benchmarks in opening new negotiation chapters in accession. It was therefore also a sign of encouragement towards the countries of the Danube Region to join the EU, however, the accession process for the other countries is now in a certain crisis. The accession process is particularly paradoxical. On the one hand, there are countries which want to join and which are institutionally the most challenged in Europe and the distance to EU membership has never been larger, and on the other hand, the *acquis* is more comprehensive than ever before and the number of countries negotiating is higher than it was in 2013. A further obstacle to the accession progress can also be veto powers by member countries on EU level. Also the overall accession environment in the decade of crisis (financial, migration, Brexit, COVID-19) leads to an overall state of stagnation on the geo-political level. The EUSDR offers a promising framework here to enhance and stimulate the process again.

The Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency from 1 November 2021 onwards will provide an interface to facilitate and promote the implementation of EU initiatives at different levels within the MRS context, being the first non-EU country taking this task in the Strategy. **Igor Korkhovyi** (Deputy Minister for EU

integration at the Ministry for Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine, National Coordinator of the EUSDR and representative of the upcoming **Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency**) highlighted the priorities of the Presidency programme which can also be **an inspiration for non-EU member states**. Thematically, the focus is on sustainable development of the Danube Region through decarbonisation and economic transformation as well as the development of human capital and labour markets, with a strong focus on **mutual co-operation and a win-win situation for Ukraine and the EUSDR**. Ukraine has made impressive progress in many areas in recent years, such as digitalisation and digital transformation, as these are among the country's priorities for strategic development. Moreover, these topics are not only among the EC's priorities for the WB countries, but are also directly and indirectly reflected in the mentioned topics of the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency. Ukraine is further actively involved in the process of green transition displayed in various policy directions e.g. in the fields of energy efficiency of buildings and just transition. Active participation in EU initiatives can serve as an inspiration for other countries seeking to join the EU.

13:00 – 14:00 Break

14:00 – 15:30 Embedding of the EUSDR into EU Funds 2021-2027

DSP appointed to support the process of aligning EUSDR priorities with EU funding sources to facilitate the implementation of the Strategy.

Johan Magnusson (EU MRS Team-Leader, DG REGIO, European Commission) underlined the importance of enough resources and funding possibilities to facilitate cooperation in the Danube Region. Interreg DTP is a major funding facility in this respect, however, **more sources are needed**. Horizon, Erasmus+, European Social Fund, CBC and DTP are just a few relevant funding sources presented in the framework of the workshop on Digitalisation & Innovation.

The legal provisions are now finalised in Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 (CPR), stating that each programme shall take into account macro-regional strategies in the summary of main challenges as well as for each specific objective. The EC is screening all mainstream national and regional programmes as well as INTERREG programmes regarding these requirements. DG REGIO geographical units (GU) consult units D1 and D2 on the programmes received. D1 and D2 screen the programmes and provide comments which are then forwarded to the Member State authorities via the Geographical Units. The **programming phase will be followed by the implementation phase** and in this latter phase **the monitoring of the implementation of embedding will be crucial**. Also the biannual report on the implementation of EU MRS will cover the progress in EUSDR embedding.

Frantisek Kolocany (Slovak EUSDR Presidency) gave an overview of the achievements of the Slovak EUSDR. Based on the revised EUSDR Action Plan, a shortlist of 36 topics from this Action Plan was defined. This shortlist became the subject of EUSDR embedding. The document **“From Words to Action”** delivered 5 first practical ideas how to put EUSDR embedding into practice. In the Slovak Republic the 36 shortlisted topics were compared to the proposed actions and objectives in the **OP Slovakia and the draft Partnership Agreement** as well as the draft **Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation (RIS3)**. At the moment, exchange is taking place with Managing Authorities and various national and EU requirements have to be taken into account. As for the experience so far, Kolocany underlined the possibility of informal contact with and among MAs as an important added value easing cooperation in the Danube Region.

Robert Lichtner (Coordinator, Danube Strategy Point) summarised the Embedding process in the last year, specifically the **dialogue between the managing and programming authorities** (ERDF/CF MA network and IPA/NDICI programming authorities network) and the embedding tools elaborated by the DSP (see [EUSDR website](#)) to visualise which funds will be available for EUSDR projects in the new programming period. This also included survey conducted among EUSDR NCs as well as managing and programming authorities to harness as much information as possible on the programming process on national level.

Barbara Willsberger (Coordinator, EUSDR PA 9) introduced the **history of the ESF network** of Managing Authorities in the Danube Region, a close cooperation project between PA 9 and PA 10. The platform facilitates the exchange and coordination between ESF MAs in the Danube Region, the respective PAs and the European Commission. Challenges in cooperation included establishing a common understanding of the role of the EUSDR towards ESF/ESF+ and establishing a common language. In the beginning it had to be clarified how the network could support MAs in finding the right partners for transnational calls and how transnational cooperation projects could be managed by MAs. The list of defined common topics as agreed in the past years since 2019 entails digitalisation, social inclusion, needs of youth including vocational training, integration of vulnerable groups (specifically the group of Roma people). Furthermore, a defined common text module for the Operational Programmes is set in place. The added value of this network is the common understanding on mutual support and know-how transfer and informal discussions. In the 2021-2027 implementation phase a central activity will be the support of project promoters in searching for project partners. Another focus will be the implementation of a project funded by the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), called Social Innovation Plus – Competence Centres (SI PLUS). Partners in this project are from Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Baden-Württemberg, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria, working together on the implementation of Social Innovation Competence Centres in all countries.

Eva Mášarová (ESF Managing Authority Slovakia) presented the activities implemented on national level in the Slovak Republic to embed the EUSDR in the **OP Slovakia**. In the multifund programme Slovakia all 5 political objectives of Cohesion Policy are covered. Specifically, Ms. Mášarová presented **PO 4 – A more social and inclusive Europe**, implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. The focus under this PO is on labour market, education and social innovation, the legislative basis being Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 (CPR) and Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). To embed the EUSDR in the OP Slovakia, the shortlisted topics for EUSDR Priority Area 9 (People and Skills) were matched with the priorities of PO 4 to ensure the future implementation of both the EUSDR via PO 4 in Slovakia. Embedding activities further include the preparation of synchronised calls (in at least two participating states of the Danube Region), national synergy-capitalisation and awarding extra points in the evaluation of projects which support the implementation of EUSDR priorities. In this context, Mášarová shared the idea to downscale results of the upcoming Competence Centres for Social Innovation from the international scale to the national scale.

15:30 – 16:30 Handover ceremony and closing of the 10th Annual Forum

Veronika Remišová (Deputy Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic) together with **Michal Blaško** (SK EUSDR Presidency, Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization) handed over the symbolic steering wheel to **Igor Korkhovyi** (upcoming UA EUSDR Presidency, Deputy Minister for the Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine). Ukraine is now the first non EU country to take over the EUSDR Presidency for the year 2022. The Ukrainian priorities are:

1. Sustainable development of the Danube Region through decarbonisation and economic transformation (environmentally friendly transport, TEN-T network, multi- and intermodal transportation),
2. Development of human capital and labour markets (quality and adaptation of education, inclusion and integration of vulnerable groups into the labor market, increasing employment).

“United by Europe in common goals, the Ukraine's EUSDR Presidency foresees restoration, development and unity of the Danube Region.”

Johan Magnusson (EU MRS Team-Leader, DG REGIO, European Commission) concluded the sessions of the 10th Annual Forum stating that the Danube Region can set an example for the rest of Europe on how to work closely together. Cooperation and its benefits will ensure security, prosperity and will invest in combating climate change and harnessing human potential from the Danube Region.