

Guidance Paper for Embedding the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) into EU Programmes

FROM ACTIONS TO FUNDING

May 2022



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1. Introduction and background

Ensure a systematic and coherent ‘embedding’ of the EUSDR into the relevant EU funding programmes of the period 2021-2027, so that these EU programmes and policies can be used effectively to implement the EUSDR

The preparation process of post-2020 programming offers a unique opportunity to all EU funds allocated to Cohesion Policy and others such as IPA and NDICI (former ENI) to address common territorial challenges in macro-regional strategies (MRS) more strategically. It opens up opportunities for the EUSDR to better achieve its objectives and, at the same time, increases the impact of the relevant programmes through better cooperation and coordination. Embedding thus enables beneficiaries of EU funds such as the EUSDR key stakeholders to better understand the interconnection and interdependence between projects, processes, policies and objectives, and to follow-up on their contribution to the strategic objectives of the MRS and their implementation. Previous experiences also show that a dialogue between authorities responsible for the programming process and key implementers of MRS is needed to make the best use of EU funding sources.

This view is also supported by the Council conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies¹ that calls upon the establishment of and participation in networks of (managing) authorities. The embedding into EU-funded programmes depends to a large extent on national and regional managing/programming authorities, the EU legal framework and EUSDR key stakeholders. In this context, the EUSDR can play a significant role by providing the impetus for engagement, facilitating the exchange of ideas and experiences, and identifying possible approaches for all stakeholders involved and illustrating how these can be implemented.

The 2nd European Commission (EC) Report on the Implementation of MRS² further emphasises that national authorities responsible for EU funds jointly agree with the National Coordinators (NCs) on main macro-regional priorities, measures, projects and governance mechanisms to be included in the partnership agreements or multi-annual programming (framework) documents in a coordinated manner with the other participating countries.

In 2019 the HR EUSDR Presidency with support of the DSP formulated a *Guidance Paper on embedding the Danube Strategy into EU programmes*. With the support of EUSDR NCs, the DSP and the Interact programme, the HR EUSDR Presidency established a EUSDR Task Force on Embedding (TF EMB-DR) to draft a comprehensive tool, which aims at coordinating the implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan with the EU's priorities as well as the priorities of the involved pre-accession and neighbouring countries for the MFF 2021 – 2027.

In the course of the embedding process, it became clear that the revised EUSDR Action Plan with all its 85 actions would be hard to utilise in the embedding implementation. Therefore, PACs and their SGs compiled a *EUSDR shortlist of three strategic topics* per PA, based on the EUSDR Action Plan, to be included in the relevant national/regional operational programmes and followed by the endorsement of EUSDR member states. NCs in consultation with the respective programming/managing authorities screened the shortlisted strategic topics for their feasibility and suitability with regards to embedding at the national level.

Based on the steps described, the DSP developed two contiguous strategic implementation tools, the *EUSDR Embedding Tool* (Annex 1a) and the *Sources for content of funding instruments* document (Annex 1b). The EUSDR Embedding Tool as a rolling document is aimed at the target groups of key EUSDR implementers and authorities responsible for programming. It is an interactive (Excel) tool for individual application. It includes the Actions of the EUSDR Action Plan as well as the EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics and their mapping to possible EU funds, IPA III and NDICI funds. It also includes an alignment with the Annexes D of the 2019 and 2020 Country Reports. The Sources for content of funding instruments document is the related overview of shortcuts to and compilation of funding instrument sources for the MFF 2021-2027 (pdf).

¹ Council of the European Union (2020). Council conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. [Online](#).

² European Commission (2019). Report from the Commission on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. [Online](#).

With the 2022 Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency, the focus of the joint embedding efforts now shifts to the implementation phase. Following the EC, the priorities, measures and projects agreed by the EU programme authorities as being relevant for the MRS, should be executed in a coordinated and synchronised way across the MRS countries³.

Against this background, EUSDR stakeholders reaffirm their will to cooperate and achieve common goals and to implement joint activities. As the financial needs and thematic scope of EUSDR embedding exceed the possibilities of individual programmes, the further embedding process draws on the work of the existing EUSDR managing/programming authorities' networks (ERDF/CF and IPA/NDICI⁴), which already have initiated a dialogue with the key stakeholders of the strategy, and jointly identified future relevant areas of cooperation, based on surveys conducted in the networks.

With the endorsement of the Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region from 22 October 2020 in Zagreb, the EUSDR Ministers agreed to support the process of embedding the EUSDR objectives and actions into the Partnership Agreements and 2021–2027 EU funding programmes allocated to Cohesion Policy, equivalent instruments for non-EU countries as well as centrally managed EU programmes being the key factors in improving the coherence and well-being of the participating states of the Danube Region, calling for additional efforts to ensure an adequate embedding process and proper discussion with the relevant programming authorities. The declaration further emphasises the need to monitor the process at national and regional levels and invites the European Commission to also to monitor and support the implementation process on macro-regional level.

In the Joint Statement of Ministers responsible for Innovation and Digitalisation of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, endorsed on 26 October 2021 in Bratislava, the EUSDR Ministers reaffirm their countries' commitment and support towards better and more focused use of Cohesion Policy funds, national funds and centralised programmes to support the EUSDR objectives, being a major endeavour to provide appropriate means for the implementation of the jointly agreed goals of the EUSDR, as laid out in the revised EUSDR Action Plan.

The Consolidated Overview of Embedding Surveys of EUSDR managing/programming authorities (ERDF/CF & IPA/NDICI) and NCs provides the **TOP 5 matchmakings** identified as regards the mainstream/national and Interreg priorities and the EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics⁵ (basic numerical count of the coverage of EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics in the national/Interreg programme context).

In 2020 the SK EUSDR Presidency has continued to strongly promote the embedding process and has published a Discussion paper 'From words to Action!' that outlines potential embedding activities that can be used by managing/programming authorities to incorporate the EUSDR objectives into their actions. In addition, the SK EUSDR Presidency invited ERDF/CF and IPA/NDICI managing /programming authorities to workshops on the integration of EUSDR into EU funding programmes and established two networks with/of managing and programming authorities for this purpose.

Based on the steps described, the DSP developed a EUSDR MA Leaflet about the embedding process presenting in a nutshell the how, the why and the what for representatives of managing/programming authorities, NCs, PACs and other stakeholders working on embedding the EUSDR into the EU programmes.

The DSP further elaborated, based on surveys conducted among the EUSDR managing/programming authorities and the NC, the strategic implementation tool Overviews of surveys of EUSDR MA Networks (ERDF/CF and IPA/NDICI; mainstream x Interreg). The interactive (Excel) tool for individual application is aimed at the target group of authorities responsible for programming and key implementers of the EUSDR. It includes an EUSDR-wide overview of how Specific Objectives of Cohesion policy are covered by national and Interreg programme. It also includes the alignment of programmes' thematic priorities with the Actions/shortlisted strategic topics of the EUSDR, the numerical overview of the coverage of these as well as the TOP 5 matchmakings identified for EUSDR actions and shortlisted strategic topics.

These **TOP 5 priorities**, which are considered relevant with regard to the alignment of key topics by the managing/programme authorities and the EUSDR objectives, are now to be coordinated in more depth and carried out in a harmonised manner in the further embedding process as described in the

³ European Commission (2019): 11. [Online](#).

⁴ The EUSDR ESF MA network has furthermore been in place since 2015.

⁵ The detailed description of the EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics is available in the endorsed version. [Online](#). The overview of TOP 5 matchmaking is based on submissions by the EUSDR MAs/programming authorities Networks until 12/2021.

present Guidelines. The TOP 5 priorities in (mainstream/national/Interreg) programmes and EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics matchmaking highlighting the EUSDR Priority Areas concerned include:

SO	TOP 5 priorities	Priority Area ⁶	MAs / Pro-grammes ⁷	Countries ⁸
1.1	To promote inclusiveness of the European Research Area and crossing innovation gap through capacity building, promoting research excellence and supporting collaboration in EU R&I programmes	PA 7	24	11
	Stimulating the effective preparation and implementation of national and regional Smart Specialisation Strategies			
	To respond to emerging challenges in the Danube region (e.g. COVID -19 crisis and its negative consequences) through research, innovation and strengthening knowledge society			
1.3	Further development of the clusters, clusters and regional development	PA 8	20	11
	Female entrepreneurship			
2.1	Increase energy efficiency and promote the decarbonisation of the heating and cooling sector	PA 2	25	11
2.4	Climate change	PA 4	35	12
	Supporting the implementation of the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan and sub-basin flood risk management plans in 2021-2027	PA 5		
	Disaster management			
	Climate change adaption			
2.7 ⁹	Traffic stakeholders/plane routes	PA 1b	28	12
	Endangered umbrella species	PA 6		
	Green infrastructure			
	Soil-related ecosystem services			

The above EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics have been elaborated and provided by the respective PAs. The topics can also be relevant for other PAs. Shortlisted strategic topics from PAs that are not represented in the TOP 5 overview can be included in a workshop at the request of the PA. We ask the PAs to contact the Pillar Officers and/or office@eusdr-dsp.eu in this regard.

The ‘synchronisation of EUSDR priorities (embedding), implementation and evaluation’ is one of the priorities defined in the Programme of the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency. The Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency considers this priority as a way to facilitate resolution of the Danube Region challenges

⁶ EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics as elaborated and provided by the respective PAs. The topics can also be relevant for other PAs. Shortlisted strategic topics from PAs that are not represented in the TOP 5 overview can be included in a workshop at the request of the PA. We ask the PAs to contact the Pillar Officers and/or office@eusdr-dsp.eu in this regard.

⁷ Based on submissions by the EUSDR MAs/programming authorities Networks until 12/2021. Interreg CBC Programmes are counted per country.

⁸ Based on submissions by the EUSDR MAs/programming authorities Networks until 12/2021. Interreg CBC Programmes are counted per country.

⁹ In April 2020 PACs and their SGs were asked to compile a shortlist of up to three strategic topics per PA, based on the EUSDR Action Plan, to be included in the relevant national/regional operational programmes. The data here has been compiled on the basis of these submissions.

more strategically through coordinated actions and synergy of efforts. In the short and medium term, the main objective is to increase the efficiency of the use of EU funds and to contribute to deepening the dialogue between the stakeholders of the EUSDR embedding process. In the long term, such a process will achieve tangible results and foster the growth of economic, social and territorial cohesion in the Danube Region.

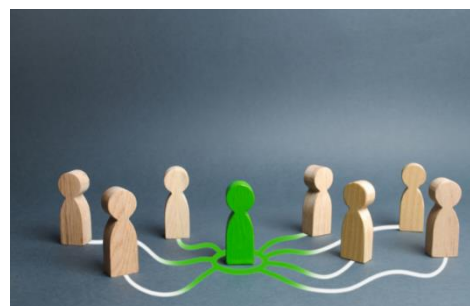
In order to further implement the abovementioned recommendations of specific measures and possible projects, this Guidance paper 'From Actions to Funding' proposes, based on the TOP 5 priorities, concrete actions that can be further implemented at regional, national and macro-regional level by managing/programming authorities and EUSDR key stakeholders, potentially coordinated as for joint activities (chapters 2-3).

For Ukraine, the embedding process is a particular experience, as the country does not have access to most of the EU's financial resources. Therefore, it is also important to highlight the Ukrainian vision of the embedding exercise and the good practice experience of aligning the priorities and objectives of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region with national policy documents (chapter 4).

In addition, specific approaches of possible monitoring and evaluation activities are identified in order to create appropriate conditions for adequate identification and reporting on the actual contribution of the programmes to the implementation of the EUSDR (chapter 5). Finally, the Guidance paper 'From Actions to Funding' proposes recommendations towards EUSDR governance and relevant embedding stakeholders (chapter 6).

2. EUSDR – implementing the embedding

The EUSDR can facilitate broader coordination mechanisms between different (national and regional) managing/programming authorities by providing the impetus for engagement and facilitating the exchange of ideas and experiences. The EUSDR provides a strategic framework for aligning funding across funding sources and creating synergies between different macro-regional stakeholders. To this end, the Strategy has identified the following key actors and how they can support and contribute to the further embedding process.



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a) Making use of existing EUSDR networks and platforms

The EUSDR can help to increase the visibility of programmes and projects and contribute to extending their outreach to a larger and broader audience in the region. The EUSDR networks and platforms play a significant role here for exchange, capitalisation and synergy-building between existing projects and in generating new project ideas.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: EUSDR networks and platforms shall be utilised for broad stakeholder engagement to mobilise actors, to develop joint fields of action and to support negotiations in overcoming the territorial and geographical constraints. To ensure the synergy and cooperation between EU and non-EU members, the networks and platforms are opened for all 14 EUSDR participating states. Joint meetings support intensified cooperation and understanding of the partners from all sectors.

b) Coordination at national level

The EUSDR National Coordinators (NCs) are co-ordinators of the embedding process in each participating country and together are key actors with the national and regional managing/programming authorities (EU funds allocated to Cohesion Policy, IPA and NDICI). The EUSDR plays a significant role here in terms of communication with as well as political support and involvement at national level.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: EUSDR NCs are asked to closely follow and monitor developments in each country, process the results of the thematic matchmaking and make them available to all relevant stakeholders¹⁰. In addition, NCs can be involved into Monitoring Committees of the programmes as observers where appropriate.

c) Streamline & support project development on thematic levels

The EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators (PACs), together with their Steering Groups (SGs), are the main actors in the implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan and related PA actions. The EUSDR plays a significant role here in systematic and timely planning of resources and the meeting project priority needs.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: PACs together with their SGs are asked to support the preparation of project pipelines through a project-based management approach of the EUSDR Action Plan.

d) Facilitate exchange of experience and development of joint solutions on thematic levels

The EUSDR PACs together with their SGs further play a key role in identifying and thematically and contextually designing the TOP 5 priorities. The EUSDR plays a significant role here in terms of facilitating the exchange of ideas and experiences to better serve macro-regional needs and interests.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: PACs together with their SGs are asked to thematically and contextually designing the project development, look for suitable partners (*matchmaking*) and support targeted information exchange.

e) Conducting workshops for thematic mapping

In order to make the transnational relevance of the activities clearer and more visible and to further support the development of embedding cooperation processes, five thematic meetings based on the TOP 5 priorities shall be conducted under the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: In the framework of the EUSDR managing/programming authorities Networks, five thematic workshops with managing/programming authorities, PACs, TRIO Presidency, EC and DSP shall be organised to discuss the possibilities and concrete implementation of the embedding activities (e.g. calls, labelling). In the workshops, examples of good practice shall be presented and discussed with the managing/programming authorities in order to assess their feasibility and expression of interest.

¹⁰ Likewise SG members (and where applicable PACs) at national level could provide support in exchanging and coordinating with the national and regional managing/programming authorities in the respective countries.

f) Strategic advisory role of the European Commission

A permanent strategic advisory by the European Commission an important factor in the whole embedding process. The ECs support and strategic guidance helps to streamline the efforts on EUSDR level towards joint perspectives and coordinated actions.

Contribution of European Commission: The EC and its Geographical Units are requested to further support the EUSDR embedding process.

g) Synergies with other MRS and common approach to regional challenges

The four EU macro-regional strategies (EUSBSR, EUSDR, EUSAIR and EUSALP) share common tasks and visions for their development. The synergies between the four EU macro-regional strategies and the joint implementation of the processes will foster development and growth across the Europe and ensure economic, social and territorial cohesion. The coordination process is supported by the European Commission (DG REGIO) and the strategic support units of the MRS (e.g. the Danube Strategy Point in the EUSDR). The support of Interact can also be taken into account.

Contribution of the four EU macro-regional strategies: The main objective is to address territorial challenges through efficiently coordinated and synergetic actions that will lead to a greater impact of financial programmes and MRS. Communication and cooperation can be efficiently carried out through MRS TRIO Presidencies meetings and joint SG meetings.

3. Embedding EUSDR during funding programme implementation



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The EUSDR allows countries and regions to ensure a stronger and more efficient policy coherence, regarding both the programme design and implementation, among all territorial levels concerned (from EU to macro-regional, national, regional and local as appropriate).¹¹

“Embedding is expected to increase programmes’ impacts through better cooperation and coordination, in addition to providing the MRS with the means to achieve their objectives. It will also allow beneficiaries of EU funds to achieve better results with their action while contributing to the strategic objectives of the MRS”.

“[...] a proper coordination with the MRS and among programmes in the macro-regions would greatly increase the impact of this support.”¹²

As the EU legal framework has set the grounds for the programmes to include the priorities of MRS within their scope and this has already taken place for most programmes in the Region during the programming period, the ground has been set for more concise and practical actions that will lead to bankable projects with macro-regional impact, also creating a leverage effect of the respective funds.

¹¹ EUSDR (2020). Leaflet on embedding dedicated to managing authorities published by DSP. [Online](#).

¹² European Commission (2020). Report from the Commission on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies [Online](#).

The following actions may be taken up by programmes financed via EU funds or national/regional budgets.

I. Coordinated/ synchronised calls for projects financed via EU/national/regional funded programmes

Following the planning and programming phase of the future EU programmes and also the inclusion of EUSDR objectives within both the 2021-2027 MFF and national/regional priorities, embedding may be continued via the calls for project proposals.

The responsible authorities may decide to launch coordinated calls for parallel cooperation between single projects or chain or projects implemented in different regions/countries of the EUSDR or depending on the legal possibilities, may decide to join forces (and budgets) and launch synchronised calls in which each partner receives money from its region/country but that the funds are treated in an integrated manner by a co-designated body. These types of calls are explained in detail below.

a) Coordinated calls for parallel cooperation between single projects / chain of projects (in different regions/countries and financed under EU funded programmes)

Coordinated calls are launched in parallel by each interested programme and enable (macro-regional relevant) projects to have similar duration and implement at the same time. Coordinated calls address the same issues (of macro-regional relevance) or contribute to the same objective but use different calls of proposals (separate submission of projects in participating regions/countries). The identification of the objectives/contents of the calls is a harmonised approach between the respective programmes.

The bodies of the respective programmes may opt for either an independent or synchronised evaluation processes. In case of a synchronised evaluation process, harmonisation of the selection criteria and assessment of the contributing to the EUSDR priorities are to be considered. The programmes may also consider harmonising the application forms or the financing rules (e.g. percentage of own/national/regional co-financing, possibility for advanced payments, use of simplified costs, lump sum etc.).

This principle could be applied to already existing projects financed under different programmes which may add a transnational component connected to the priorities of the EUSDR (actions/shortlisted strategic topics).

The launch of coordinated calls as well as the achieved results may be discussed within the EUSDR managing/programming authorities Networks. The decision on the call, the selection process and the approval of projects is carried by each participating programme.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: EUSDR key stakeholders are requested to get in touch with managing/programming authorities, to be involved in identifying the relevant topics, contribute to the evaluation process, advice on thematic implementation issues, and collect information, etc.

b) Synchronised calls (of regions/countries using own national/regional budgets)

Synchronised calls offer the partner regions/countries involved to select those priorities from the shortlisted topics of the EUSDR Action Plan which are the most relevant for them. This tool and the Strategy provide a framework to focus on the most important issues addressed by participating countries¹³. As organising such calls may prove difficult for EU funded programmes, they may be

¹³ EUSDR (2021). EUSDR EMBEDDING – FROM WORDS TO ACTION! Discussion Paper February 2021. [Online](#).

implemented mostly through regional and/or national funding. In addition, using different terminology may prove useful in order to differentiate among the funding source.

Synchronised calls are launched by each region/country and the projects are connected to the EUSDR priorities (actions/shortlisted strategic topics). The identification of the objectives/contents of the calls is jointly defined and common to all the funding organisations.

There is need for coordination among the respective regions/countries (regional/national funding) for a joint call. The programme owners (ministries, agencies, regional or local administrations), that are legally entitled to design, publish and fund calls and decide on funding scope/budgeting/funding rules are in charge with operation aspects for programme implementation (timing of calls evaluation/selection/financial management etc.).

The aforementioned bodies may decide through a joint agreement to contribute to the budget of a synchronised call and in order to ease the administrative burden and may jointly decide to appoint a secretariat/intermediary body to run the call through.

Such calls have the potential to create benefits for applicants due to cross border/transnational benefits and provide complementary measures that lead to overlapping of activities and interventions. They developing transnational and trans-regional linkages among SMEs, research institutions, business actors and ensure synergies between different programmes, creating added value and closing funding gaps. The most important advantage of such a call is that money stays in the region but within a cooperation framework, therefore each partner of the consortium is only allowed to access the budget designated by the region/country it is located it.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: EUSDR key stakeholders are requested to get in touch with managing/programming authorities, to be involved in identifying the relevant topics, contribute to the evaluation process, advice on thematic implementation issues, and collect information, etc.

c) EUSDR targeted calls

Programming authorities may decide to launch calls for proposals designed based on the needs of the territory and aligned to the objectives of the EUSDR. Such calls would only be available to project proposals proving their contribution and alignment to the macro-regional priorities and targets. The applications receiving funding would automatically be labelled as EUSDR relevant and could benefit the support and awareness raising provided by the Strategy.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: EUSDR key stakeholders are requested to get in touch with managing/programming authorities, to be involved in identifying the relevant topics, contribute to the evaluation process, advice on thematic implementation issues, and collect information, etc.

II. Awarding extra points in the evaluation process for EUSDR relevant projects

Awarding additional points to project proposals with MRS (EUSDR) relevance has already proven as a useful and working tool in identifying EUSDR relevant projects. In this case, it is necessary to set clear and precisely defined criteria for the selection of projects trough calls for project proposals (EU and non-EU likewise) as well as through the entire implementation process.

During the evaluation procedure of (certain) calls for proposals, programmes may decide to award supplementary points to projects that are thematically aligned to the EUSDR and prove their contribution to its objectives. Such contribution may be either described by the project proposal itself and analysed/evaluated by the Evaluation Committee or confirmed through a “letter of recommendation” by the respective EUSDR PAs.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: EUSDR key stakeholders are requested to get in touch with managing/programming authorities, to be involved in identifying the relevant topics for both programme and Strategy, award letters of recommendation to the project promoters, contribute to the evaluation process, advice on thematic implementation issues, and collect information, etc.

III. Labelling of projects having EUSDR impact

The exercise would focus on projects that are thematically aligned to the EUSDR regardless the funding programme. The goal is to have reliable and comparable labelling within the funding programmes available in the Danube Region. Labelling should also be reflected within the monitoring system of the respective programme.

Labeling can be done for a) all applications and/or b) funding decisions and/or only certain calls. Should the labelling process be started in the application process, the project promoters would be the ones indicating/explaining the relevance of the project proposal to the EUSDR. Different categories/levels of alignment could be assigned (e.g., part of the EUSDR, interested in being part of the EUSDR, not part of the EUSDR etc.) based either on the self-analysis of the project consortium or following the evaluation process.

The selection and/or labelling of EUSDR relevant projects should be based on clearly defined criteria, jointly developed by all relevant stakeholders (EC, programme- and MRS/EUSDR-level), based on e.g., (a) contribution of the project to the objectives of the EUSDR and (b) relevance for the macro-region through some form of coordination or cooperation with actors in other EUSDR participating states (territorial impact).

Both systems are very much dependent on coordination, capacity and understanding on the side of programme-level stakeholders. As extra points for MRS related projects or project labelling is not defined in the funding regulations, it is not mandatory to be put into practice. However, this effort will help to form coherent information on MRS level, supporting programmes to gain comparable data and show impact in a wider territory. In addition, it is possible to report concrete achievements (contribution of the programme to EUSDR objectives) by using the common output and result indicators.

Moreover, such an approach would support the monitoring of the embedding (as described per chapter 5) proving added value of the joint actions.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: EUSDR key stakeholders are requested to get in touch with managing/programming authorities, to be involved in identifying the relevant topics, contribute to the evaluation process, advice on thematic implementation issues, and collect information, etc.

IV. Keeping track of MRS support via the programme evaluation

Managing authorities of EU funding programmes allocated to Cohesion Policy shall carry out evaluations of the programmes and set up a plan for this process. Evaluation of MRS impact could be integrated in the evaluation plan assessing the impact of supported operations and their contribution to MRS implementation¹⁴. Including such aspects within the evaluation of the programmes would reflect on its contribution to the objectives of the EUSDR. A harmonised approach among EU programmes allocated to Cohesion Policy in the Danube Region could be discussed within the existing MA Networks and would offer the possibility for a coherent analysis.

¹⁴ For more information, please see Chapter 5.

V. Coordinated implementation and managing/programming authorities

The coordination between the relevant (national and regional) managing/programming authorities and EUSDR stakeholders is of essential importance.

Contribution of managing/programming authorities: The (national and regional) managing/programming authorities are requested to involve EUSDR key stakeholders (NCs/PACs/SG members) into Monitoring Committees of the programmes as observers where appropriate.

4. Embedding EUSDR in non-EU countries: example of Ukraine

In the case of the five EUSDR non-EU countries, embedding implies a strategic approach to planning priorities and budgets at national level, reflected in state programmes as well as in the priorities of the national IPA and NDICI financial envelopes. Embedding EUSDR priorities in these countries should not be limited to the Interreg programmes participated alongside the other member states. Therefore, close coordination is needed between the EUSDR NCs and National IPA Coordinators/External Assistance Coordinators for sustainable and balanced regional development that includes the EUSDR objectives and actions.

The legal basis in the European MFF regulations defines Article 63 (4) of the Common Provisions Regulation, that „all or part of an operation may be implemented outside of a Member State, including outside the Union, provided that the operation contributes to the objectives of the programme”¹⁵.

The process of the EUSDR priorities and goals harmonisation with state programme documents at the national level was actively conducted in Ukraine during the year 2021 as a good example. It should be noted that the embedding process coincided with the development of Ukraine's state programme documents for the new planning period 2021-2027, which allowed the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency not only to review the current state of the Danube Strategy implementation in Ukraine, but also to strengthen its role by aligning its main priorities with state programme documents.

From the point of view of the Danube Strategy implementation at the national level, its priorities, goals, and actions were included to the following documents:

- State Strategy for Regional Development for 2021-2027. One of the main goals is - "Development of the Ukrainian part of the Danube region and cross-border cooperation". This provides alignment of the main Danube Strategy priorities with sectoral strategies, national and regional programmes.
- State Programme for Cross-Border Cooperation for the period 2021-2027 (hereinafter - the Programme), which is synchronised with the budget cycles and major EU programme documents and is configured with the Danube Strategy objectives.

The Programme includes all Danube Strategy priorities, which emphasises the intentions and readiness of Ukraine to further implement the Danube Strategy and effectively develop the Danube macro-region. The main funding sources for the implementation of these documents are state and local budgets. For example, an excellent financial instrument is the State Fund for Regional Development. Its main objective is to implement investment programmes and regional development projects aimed

¹⁵ REGULATION (EU) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council, p.220. [Online](#).

at meeting the priorities set out in the State Strategy for Regional Development and relevant regional development strategies.

The Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency also provided recommendations to the representatives of Ukraine in the EUSDR Steering Groups and to the NDICI managing authority in Ukraine on taking into account the main EUSDR objectives and priorities in the new programming period and including them in sectoral strategies and action plans. Another financial instrument provided by the State to support the development of cross-border cooperation is used to co-finance projects (programmes) of cross-border cooperation in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region.

In addition, at the regional level in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region (Chernivtsi, Zakarpattia, Odessa and Ivano-Frankivsk oblasts) regional development strategies were elaborated and approved to implement the objectives of the Strategy at the operational level. So far, the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency has started the next stage of the EUSDR embedding exercise – the process of monitoring the activities of executive authorities related to the integration of the EUSDR main topics and priorities into the national sectoral strategic documents and programmes.

This will allow us to analyse the implementation of the main themes and priorities of the EUSDR in the new cross-border cooperation programmes for the next EU financial period, as well as increase the efficiency of using funds from other sources of international technical assistance.

5. Monitoring the outcomes of the embedding process



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The overall aim of monitoring the outcomes of the embedding process is to depict how EU funds and funding programmes contribute to the achievement of the EUSDR's objectives. It allows to compare actual achievements to planned measures, identify good practice examples and show bottlenecks in the translation of the EUSDR and its Actions into EU funded programmes. Thereby it can show where further work may be necessary and improve the process to get better results in the future.

Due to its complexity, to monitor the embedding process is a challenging task, where several factors like different approaches from Strategy level vs. programme level, different structures in the 14 participating states (central and federal, EU and non-EU) and stakeholders conducting activities at different levels (regional, national, EU...) need to be taken into account. Even though it is hardly possible to get a full coverage of data (i.e., all regional/national programmes, calls, projects etc.), through combining different approaches and information sources, the most important (strategic) processes and outcomes can be covered. Both phases of embedding (programming and implementation phase) are relevant for the monitoring and require a different approach as well as contributions from different stakeholders.

In the following part, the main steps and information sources are summarised. More detailed information can be found in the consolidated paper¹⁶ of DSP from October 2021.

¹⁶ Paper on Monitoring of Embedding the EUSDR into EU Funds and Funding Programmes 2021-2027. [Online](#).

a) **Programming phase** (includes the monitoring of funding programmes)

Reporting by the EC

The monitoring of the programming phase is to a large extent covered by the EC. In the case of ERDF/CF and INTERREG programmes, DG REGIO confirmed to screen all (draft) operational programmes regarding the legal requirements (e.g. check the consideration of MRS at the level of specific objectives). If MRS are not sufficiently embedded, the respective authorities responsible for planning and programming are asked by DG REGIO to clarify and provide more information. DG REGIO further confirmed to follow the call from the Council conclusions from 12/2020 to report on the embedding process, however, at this stage it is not known yet in which format¹⁷ and when. Several EUSDR member states highlighted that the role of the EC is crucial, being the central institution where all information is available, and requested a comprehensive report that can be incorporated into the system of the EUSDR. Further clarification with DG REGIO is necessary, in order to assess the extent to which this reporting can contribute to the data collection of the monitoring.

Additional input from NCs and managing/programming authorities

NCs contribute to provide further information on the embedding at national level, having contacts to the programming authorities and an overview on the relevant programmes. Ideally, NCs were involved in the programming process and could bring in EUSDR priorities. Reports on the programming process at national levels are regularly provided by NCs in the course of EUSDR Task Force (EMB-DR) meetings for embedding the EUSDR into EU Programmes.

Also the different **networks with/of programme-level stakeholders** (MAs, programming authorities, intermediate bodies etc.) can be utilised as valuable source of information. As these network meetings will continue, reports on the programming process at national levels in EU member states (ESF and ERDF/CF network) and non-EU countries (IPA/NDICI network) can be used to complement the monitoring by the EC.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: The NCs are requested to continuously update from a national perspective in the course of EUSDR Task Force (EMB-DR) meetings for embedding. The different networks with/of programme-level stakeholders can be utilised as valuable source of information. DG REGIO and EUSDR key stakeholders are requested to further discuss the format of the EC reporting, in order to find the most suitable and appropriate solution for all involved stakeholders. Once the reporting by the EC is available, the DSP is requested to summarise all available information and provide a consolidated output document on the embedding of the EUSDR into funds and programmes 2021-2027.

b) **Implementation phase** (includes the reporting and monitoring of calls and projects with relevance for the EUSDR and their impact in the EUSDR context)

Monitoring of calls via EuroAccess

After the programming (preparation) phase is completed, programmes start with implementation, which is usually (but not exclusively) organised by calls for proposals. As soon as concrete programme calls are launched, the respective sources can be scanned regarding their relevance for the EUSDR. An excellent source of up-to-date information on calls and available funding from centrally and shared

¹⁷ Possible solutions are, e.g., generated data from the System for Fund Management in the European Union (SFC database) regarding OP contribution and references to EUSDR and later reported fund allocation; or a more elaborated (qualitative) analysis provided by DG REGIO.

managed programmes provides the online tool ***EuroAccess Macro-Regions***. The aim of the tool is to support the optimal search for current funding opportunities by looking for relevant calls regarding the region, thematic focus, or type of funding. The DSP has been closely cooperating with *EuroAccess* and aims to further intensify this cooperation for monitoring purposes and for a more efficient and targeted dissemination of funding and call information on thematic, PA and cross-pillar level.

Beside the thematic relevance of calls, it can also be checked if specific selection criteria or approaches are used for stimulating EUSDR-relevant operations (e.g., extra points for projects with EUSDR relevance – see chapter 3 and below).

Monitoring of projects via EUSDR monitoring system

The monitoring of the implementation phase can partially be covered by the new **PAC reporting tool ‘Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas’**. Via this tool, PACs can report on ongoing projects in their respective PA, including funding sources and budget. Of course, PACs can only report on projects they are aware of/connected to. Hence, it will not provide the full picture, but an overview of the most relevant projects for the EUSDR. Also, if relevant, PACs can share further information on their embedding activities, main challenges in relation to funding and good practice examples (where applicable).

As embedding the EUSDR into EU funds and programmes is an ongoing process, it is advisable to constantly monitor the outcomes of the embedding processes. Since the new PAC reporting tool is going to be implemented from 2022 onwards every second year, it would be possible to use these data, and if necessary, adapt the tool to the respective needs for the monitoring of the embedding.

Also the information shared by the NCs in the reporting to the EC (Questionnaire for the Commission report on the implementation of MRS) can be utilised in this regard.

Monitoring of projects via programme/managing authorities

Another approach would be to make use of the project assessment and/or monitoring systems of managing/programming authorities.

If contribution to MRS (EUSDR) is already indicated on the **project proposals** (application forms), it is easy to identify and extract projects with EUSDR relevance. As described in chapter 3, different categories/levels of alignment could be assigned (e.g., part of the EUSDR, interested in being part of the EUSDR, not part of the EUSDR etc.). In addition, extra points could be awarded to EUSDR relevant project proposals. Awarding additional points to project proposals with MRS (EUSDR) relevance has already proven as a useful and working tool in identifying EUSDR relevant projects.

Programme authorities could alternatively identify and **label projects** that are relevant for / connected to the EUSDR at a later stage (accepted projects that are included in the monitoring systems). Also, in this case it needs to be clearly defined which projects to consider as MRS (relevant) projects. Currently, in most cases managing/programming authorities report on their contribution to MRS by broadly attributing thematically relevant projects. In certain fields, e.g., water quality or connectivity, such general attribution could be still considered. However, in general projects without any form of ‘external’ cooperation are of limited relevance for the EUSDR, even if they are thematically compliant with the Strategy.

Keep track of programme evaluations

An additional approach would be to use **programme evaluations** as additional source of information on the outcomes of the EUSDR embedding process. To assure efficient use of funds, according to Article 44 of the CPR, Member States or managing/programming authorities of EU programmes allocated to Cohesion Policy shall carry out evaluations of the programmes and set up a plan for this process. The evaluation shall assess the programme's effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and/or EU added value with the aim to improve the quality of the design and implementation of programmes. In addition, an evaluation for each programme to assess its impact shall be carried out by 30 June 2029¹⁸. Evaluation of MRS impact could be integrated in the evaluation plan, assessing the impact of supported operations and their contribution to MRS implementation. A harmonised approach towards EU programme evaluation allocated to Cohesion Policy would provide comparable data on the progress achieved, fund contribution to MRS thematic objectives and processes, and impact (change brought by supported operations) of funded operations in the MRS context. However, such an evaluation would assess the territorial impact (programme level data) and could reflect on the joint cooperation initiatives implemented by several countries and regions, but not the added value of MRS cooperation as such.

Contribution of EUSDR key stakeholders: The PACs are requested to carry out the reporting of projects via the new EUSDR PAC reporting tool, which is implemented from 2022 onwards every second year. The managing/programming authorities and the EC are requested to proof the possibility of extra points, project labelling, MRS in programme evaluations etc. and discuss it with EUSDR key stakeholders e.g., in the course of EUSDR managing/programming authorities network meetings. The DSP is requested to summarise available information in the EUSDR Implementation Reports or provide consolidated output documents on the embedding outcomes during programme implementation in the years 2022, 2024, 2026 and 2028 for the funding period 2021-2027

6. Conclusions and recommendations towards EUSDR governance & relevant embedding stakeholders

Embedding macro-regional strategies within the financial framework needs a twofold approach by both MRS key stakeholders and managing/programming authorities, requesting implication and contributions from both coordination and implementation levels, the political and technical. It is without a doubt a complex process that only started with the programming phase, that needs to be supported during the implementation of the programmes and closely monitored so any needed adjustments may be brought in real-time and not only registered as lessons learned



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The **contribution and support of the European Commission** in all phases of this process is of uttermost importance and needs to be maintained.

The Danube Region has taken important steps in aligning its needs to all levels, these being represented in both the EUSDR Action Plan and within the programming framework by a participatory

¹⁸ Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy. Online.

approach to both the revision and programming processes. Such coordinated actions must be continued at all levels.

Throughout the so far coordinated actions by both Strategy and programmes the basis has been set for a common language that will lead to increased cooperation and impact in the Region. The Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency appreciates the **involvement of EUSDR key stakeholders** in the programming process in various countries in the Region and encourages their support towards the programming/managing authorities during the implementation of the respective financial instruments.

The cooperation and continuous information flow must be pursued in the years to come as the Strategy firmly believes in the important contribution of the existing **EUSDR programming/managing authorities Networks** in this respect. The Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency would like to thank the programming/managing authorities voluntarily taking part to these networks and invites for these networks to be enlarged, recommending for their work to continue and receive adequate support from the Strategy.

As cooperation has no limits, the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency acknowledges that implementation has legal, technical and administrative constraints that must be followed. Therefore, the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency trusts the programming/managing authorities in identifying the optimal technical solutions to **reflect the EUSDR at project and programme level**.

A **proactive approach** to implement the embedding is needed from the side of the Strategy as well. The framework has been set, therefore the EUSDR key stakeholders need to be involved, getting in touch with the programming/managing authorities, using the existing networks for partnership development, closely following the financial opportunities via EuroAccess, actively developing their policy-action-process chains, encouraging and supporting project development and meeting the needs of their stakeholders.

Moreover, the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency asks the DSP, on behalf of the EUSDR, to organise the **5 thematic workshops** bringing at the same table the relevant EUSDR key stakeholders and the programming/managing authorities, following the bellow calendar of activities:

	Envisaged activity	Estimated calendar*
1	Information on the TOP 5 to all Priority Areas	MAY 2022
2	Political support and involvement at national level via the NCs to verify and if needed to propose further programming/managing authorities to take part at thematic meetings	MAY 2022
3	Organisation of 5 thematic meetings/workshops, within the framework of EUSDR programming/managing authorities Network, with PACs, MAs, Programmes, TRIO Presidency, EC and DSP – to look for concrete use of the embedding tools/activities to be implemented. At the meetings also provide good practice examples from EUSBSR/EUSAIR or other MRS.	JULY 2022
4	As follow up of each meeting, the proposed and discussed topic may be subject to next meeting if needed and agreed among the participants	OCTOBER 2022

* Preliminary proposal; deviations and adjustments are possible due to current circumstances, especially in connection with the current Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency and the crisis in Ukraine.

Long term sustainable solutions must be identified and implemented in **monitoring the embedding** process and its results at all levels.

As embedding should not be limited to EU funding programmes, the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency believes that national and regional budgets as well as financial opportunities by other donors should be considered. Not only do the needs of the Region exceed the financial possibilities of the transnational cooperation, but they need to be reflected in bankable projects that have a leverage effect and benefit the final beneficiaries in the Region.

Thus, the Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency plans to organise a “financing Agora” at the **11th EUSDR Annual Forum 2022** with concrete outcomes of the aforementioned 5 workshops as a pitch where programmes and projects seeking financing can come together with potential calls, mirroring opportunities (b2b matchmaking), etc.

The Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency recommends that the **Danube Financial Dialogue** be revived and reconsidered by the future presidencies, but may also organise a Financial Dialogue with banks and other relevant financing institutions in the course of the 11th EUSDR Annual Forum 2022.

The Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency highly encourages both the PACs and the DSP to **pursue the EUSDR embedding** within their future projects. The contribution of the PACs and the support of the DSP to the smooth implementation of embedding and the continuous dialogue and proactive actions are of utmost importance for this process to proceed and produce its leverage effects in the Region.