



EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028

Version 1 | September 2023





Content

1. Introduction.....	2
1.1. Background	2
1.2. Objectives.....	2
2. Evaluation framework	3
2.1. Coordination and implementation	3
2.2. Synergy with other Strategies, initiatives and programmes.....	4
2.3. Source of evaluation expertise	4
2.4. Relevant evidence and data collection	5
2.5. Involvement of stakeholders	6
2.6. Human resources and budget for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan	7
2.7. Selection of service provider.....	7
3. Planned evaluations	7
3.1. Process/Implementation Evaluation.....	8
3.2. Policy Evaluation	12
4. Timing.....	15

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is an EU macro-regional strategy adopted by the European Commission (EC) in December 2010 and endorsed by the European Council in 2011. The EUSDR was jointly developed by the EC, together with the Danube Region countries and stakeholders, in order to jointly address common challenges. The Council Conclusions on the Report from the EC on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies (2023) highlighted the ‘need to improve the monitoring and evaluation and to increase the visibility of the results of the Strategies’, as well as the ‘shared responsibility between the Strategies participating countries and the Commission for comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms’¹.

The EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028 sets out the evaluation strategy within the implementation period of the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), building on the previous Evaluation Plan, which covered the years 2019-2022 (version 1.0 from January 2019 and version 2.0 from May 2021). This Evaluation Plan is a strategic document providing information on the planned evaluations including the timing and type of evaluation, methodological approach, data needs and availability as well as resources needed. It also outlines the roles and responsibilities of the EUSDR core stakeholders in planning and implementing evaluations and following up on the evaluation outcomes.

The Evaluation Plan has been developed by the DSP in close coordination with the Steering Group for evaluation (SG DANUVAL), taking into account, among others, the developments and lessons learnt from the implementation of the EUSDR since 2010, existing reports and previous evaluations, and the results of an online survey among EUSDR core stakeholders on possible evaluation topics (April 2023).

The EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028 will be implemented by the DSP together with interested EUSDR core stakeholders such as National Coordinators (NCs), Priority Area Coordinators (PACs), the EC, the Danube Youth Council (DYC) and external partners/experts. All EUSDR core stakeholders will be informed about the progress of the implementation, and the outcomes of the evaluations (final evaluation reports) will be published on the EUSDR website.

As evaluation needs might change during the DSP 2023-2028 period, the Evaluation Plan shall be regularly reviewed and adapted according to the needs of the key implementers of the EUSDR. At least one update of the EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028 shall be conducted in-between the two planned evaluations, e.g. in 2026/2027.

1.2. Objectives

In operational terms, the Evaluation Plan supports the Strategy’s implementation and the core stakeholders, national and thematic likewise, by ensuring relevance and high quality of evaluations through proper planning, comprehensive and smooth implementation of the evaluation process and appropriate resources for the agreed evaluation activities.

¹ Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies - Council conclusions (27.06.2023): Section 12. [Online](#).

The ultimate objectives of the evaluation activities are:

- enhancing the good governance of the Strategy
- providing an evidence-base for macro-regional processes and workflows, as well as the needs for transnational governance in the macro-region
- improving the effectiveness of the implementation and the impact of the Strategy
- strengthening the stakeholders' involvement
- enhancing the communication flows
- reinforcing the Strategy's capacity and providing appropriate tools to bring about a desired change in the macro-region
- providing appropriate input, data and evidence to future revisions of the EUSDR Action Plan in accordance with the needs of PACs, NCs, the EC, the DYC and other stakeholders
- enhancing the accountability of the Strategy by providing a neutral input from external experts, thus also taking into account an external point of view and offering possible new implications for the EUSDR

2. Evaluation framework

2.1. Coordination and implementation

The DSP is entrusted to coordinate the evaluation process. To support the process in the broadest way possible, the SG DANUVAL was set up in 2019, consisting of the following members:

- European Commission (DG REGIO and other interested DGs and/or Commission services)
- EUSDR TRIO-Presidency and interested NCs
- One PAC per EUSDR Pillar representing the entire EUSDR Pillar
- Danube Region Programme
- Danube Youth Council

Further stakeholders may be invited to meetings, to support the SG DANUVAL, depending on their respective expertise and related to ongoing topics such as the EUSDR Action Plan revision, internal and external communication of the EUSDR, capacity building activities, monitoring or embedding. Such representatives could be:

- Strategy's key implementers (if not regularly participating in the SG DANUVAL),
- Thematic and other (external) experts (e.g. ESPON or representatives from other macro-regional strategies)
- Interested members of EUSDR managing authorities Networks or other funding programmes (e.g. managing/programming authorities or Joint Secretariats)
- Business sector, academia, mass media, social partners or other civil society bodies, e.g. responsible for promoting social inclusion, gender equality and non-discrimination.

However, to ensure that the group remains operational, the total number of members should stay limited to about 30 participants.

The SG DANUVAL represents the Strategy's stakeholders and allows their participation in designing and delivering the Evaluation Plan. The SG DANUVAL should support in particular the:

- Development and update(s) of the Evaluation Plan
- Subsequent elaboration of Terms of Reference (ToR) for the selection of external evaluators
- Elaboration and/or fine-tuning of evaluation questions
- Facilitating whenever possible access to information, data and/or data sources useful for the evaluations
- Reviewing the Inception Report and draft evaluation reports
- Proposing and monitoring follow-up measures based on evaluation findings

The DSP has the main coordination responsibility on activities related to external evaluation and ensures good communication flows and smooth interaction between all stakeholders concerned. The SG DANUVAL will be providing input, feedback and advice.

2.2. Synergy with other Strategies, initiatives and programmes

Synergies shall be sought with the other three macro-regional strategies (MRS). Particular attention shall be paid to the interfaces of cooperation and investment, as well as policy makers and international, cross-border and regional initiatives (e.g. ICPDR, the UN Carpathian convention, Three-Seas Initiative, etc.). The synergies with other MRS are of particular importance especially with regards to embedding MRS and aligning funding sources but also other strategic processes the MRS have in common.

The DSP supports the general exchange of information and coordination with the other MRS, via Interact's Working Group on 'building common capacity support environment for enhanced implementation of the MRS' and the exchange of best practices concerning monitoring and evaluation processes via its sub-groups, especially via the sub-group on monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, direct coordination and cooperation with the Support Units of other MRS takes place according to demand. Similar evaluations in other MRS can be covered by the DSP, upon invitation, in terms of synergies, coordination, information and good practice exchange.

Synergies between MRS can also be found in relevant ESPON studies and projects. Previous projects which are especially relevant for monitoring and evaluation are the territorial monitoring tool MRS. ESPON as well as the project on "Territorial Scenarios for the Danube and Adriatic Ionian Macro-regions TEVI 2050".

2.3. Source of evaluation expertise

The evaluations are to be carried out within a mixed framework of internal and external expertise.

The expertise of external experts is needed in particular to assess the complex environment of the EUSDR governance, its relationship and working environment with the governance of the EU and EU funding programmes. The external experts are functionally independent from the key implementers of the EUSDR, thus being an essential pre-requisite for a high quality evaluation with constructive proposals and valid opinions on the different elements of the Strategy.

Based on the requirements of the EUSDR, the evaluation experts will be in charge of the methodological and quality aspects. They can also support the capacity building process, e.g. by

organising peer reviewing, elaborating guidance, aggregating the findings of the evaluation, providing meta-evaluation and making in-depth analyses when necessary.

In order to ensure the cost-efficiency of the evaluations, one main aspect is to work with existing data, e.g. from the EUSDR monitoring system, key documents published by EUSDR (the key implementers of the Strategy such as the PAs, EUSDR Presidencies, the DSP, etc.), the EU institutions, the academia, consultants, programmes and others.

Data collection will be facilitated by the experts whenever necessary (e.g. through interviews, surveys etc.). The DSP plays a facilitating role and takes into account the needs and available resources of the PACs (and their SGs) and NCs. Moreover, the DSP plays a role of operational coordination and supervision of the entire process. DSP's Evaluation Officer coordinates all evaluation steps with the key implementers of the Strategy and the Commission and drafts the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the evaluations to be conducted.

2.4. Relevant evidence and data collection

The Evaluation Plan builds on various evidence and lessons learned from the implementation of the EUSDR since 2010.

In line with the previous Evaluation Plan, two evaluations were conducted:

- Metis (2019): Governance/operational Evaluation assessing the effectiveness, communication and stakeholder involvement of the Strategy ([online](#)).
- Spatial Foresight (2022): Policy/impact evaluation of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region ([online](#)).

To support more in-depth evaluations, a comprehensive monitoring of the EUSDR was introduced in February 2022². The monitoring concept developed by DSP is a harmonised solution, bringing together different reporting strands in one comprehensive online reporting tool:

- EC questionnaire for Reports from the EC on the Implementation of EU MRS
- Information from previous PAC project reports to the DTP/DRP (additional information annex)
- Questions to gain further information on the activities and implementation in each PA, for a comprehensive and more strategic approach

Via this monitoring system, PACs are reporting on the progress and achievements of the Priority Areas every second year. In addition to this reporting, all EUSDR key implementers and stakeholders are invited to provide further relevant studies, reports, etc. (e.g. carried out by the PAs) to the DSP and to participate in evaluation activities carried out by the service providers (external experts), such as interviews or online surveys.

Further documents and sources of information to be taken into consideration are, among others:

- Reporting from the NCs to the EC (where available, to be provided by the DSP)
- EUSDR Implementation Reports ([online](#))
- EUSDR key documents ([online](#)), including:

² Reporting on the Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas. EUSDR Monitoring Concept. February 2022.

- EUSDR Action Plan
- EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper
- Rules of Procedure of PACs and NCs
- Joint Statements of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EUSDR
- Joint Statements of Danube Parliamentarians
- EUSDR Needs Assessments (on cooperation between PACs and relevant stakeholders and on the engagement in Steering Groups (SGs))
- EUSDR Presidency Programmes and Embedding papers by the EUSDR Presidencies including DSP's Embedding tools ([online](#))
- Reports from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies and the accompanying Annexes ([online](#))
- Council conclusions on the Implementation of EU macro-regional strategies ([online](#))
- Data from the DRP's 2 years reviews of PAC projects (expected in early 2025 and 2027, to be provided by the DRP)
- Relevant territorial studies and projects (especially the monitoring tool MRS. ESPON as well as the ESPON project on "Territorial Scenarios for the Danube and Adriatic Ionian Macro-regions TEVI 2050")
- Academic literature and studies on the EUSDR
- Flash Eurobarometer on the citizens' awareness and perception of EU Regional policy (released every two years, e.g. Flash Eurobarometer 497, 2021, [online](#))

Documents published by the European Parliament and its Research Service, the Committee of the Regions, and European Economic and Social Committee should also be considered, whenever appropriate. This also applies to statements of ministers adopted outside the Council, but in an EUSDR framework.

Based on the specifications of the EUSDR (as defined in the Evaluation Plan and the Terms of Reference for the selection of a service provider, and further specified during the kick-off meeting), the experts contracted for the evaluation are asked to propose appropriate methodologies for data collection and analysis such as desk research, interviews, case studies, online surveys, etc., thus ensuring the involvement of all relevant stakeholders.

2.5. Involvement of stakeholders

To ensure transparency and quality, the involvement of EUSDR core stakeholders in the entire evaluation process is ensured through the SG DANUVAL. The SG DANUVAL represents the Strategy's stakeholders and allows their participation in designing and delivering the Evaluation Plan (see 2.12.1 Coordination and implementation).

In addition, all EUSDR core stakeholders will be, regularly in NC, PAC, NC-PAC meetings, via email and upon request, informed about the progress of the implementation and invited to provide feedback on the draft Evaluation Plan as well as the draft evaluation reports, thus safeguarding transparency on the entire evaluation process, a good information flow, provide room for feedback and discussions and securing full involvement of the EUSDR.

Moreover, different stakeholders and experts may be involved to bring in specific expertise.

The methods for data collection and involvement of all relevant stakeholders are to be proposed by the evaluation experts. The final methodology and target groups of online surveys, interviews etc. (e.g. PACs, NCs, EC, DYC, programming/managing authorities, representatives of academia/civil society/economic sector etc.) will be clarified during the kick-off meeting between the evaluation experts and the SG DANUVAL.

The evaluation results will be shared with relevant stakeholders through various communication channels. The final evaluation reports will also be published on the EUSDR website.

2.6. Human resources and budget for the implementation of the Evaluation Plan

The head of the DSP and the Evaluation Officer will coordinate the entire process. Additional DSP staff members, especially the DSP Pillar Officers, will be involved to liaise with the PAs. The DSP Communication Officer will ensure the communication of the outcomes and respective capacity building measures will be coordinated with the DSP Capacity Building Officer. Key stakeholders of the EUSDR (NCs, PACs...) are kindly asked to cooperate in this regard.

Based on previous experience, the estimated evaluation needs and the overall budget available via the DSP project, a maximum amount of EUR 140,000 is foreseen for evaluations in the period 2023-2028.

2.7. Selection of service provider

The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the selection of evaluation experts will be developed for each evaluation separately. ToR should include background and context information, the awarding procedure, specification of services and evaluation questions, time schedule, required qualifications of the evaluation experts, assessment criteria, as well as the required content of the offer.

The DSP is in charge of drafting the ToR, in close cooperation with the SG DANUVAL. The ToR will be published on the EUSDR website.

3. Planned evaluations

Based on an online survey among all EUSDR key stakeholders on potential evaluation topics³, a subsequent discussion with the SG DANUVAL and as presented at the NC Meeting in spring 2023, two evaluations with the following focus are proposed:

2024/2025	A Process/Implementation Evaluation, assessing the strategic dimension, governance and technical implementation of the EUSDR. Also the policy impact and funding should be taken into account.
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³ Online survey among EUSDR NCs, PACs, EC, DRP and DYC on possible evaluation topics, performed in April 2023

2027/2028	A Policy Evaluation, focusing on the policy impact as well as on embedding/funding. Furthermore, an updated assessment of the technical implementation, the governance and the strategic dimension of the Strategy should be considered.
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3.1. Process/Implementation Evaluation

The Process/Implementation Evaluation should focus primarily on the strategic dimension, the policy implementation and the governance architecture. Also the policy impact resulting from the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 as well as funding should be taken into account. As a follow-up of both, the Operational Evaluation from 2019 and the Impact Evaluation from 2022, the evaluation aims at:

- Assessing the responsibilities, capacities and cooperation intensity of/among EUSDR key actors
- Identifying well-functioning processes and workflows providing concrete learning and implementation examples
- Identifying obstacles in the implementation of the Strategy and develop recommendations on how to overcome them
- Develop appropriate recommendations for future revisions of the Action Plan

The evaluation should primarily answer the following questions, organised around five main topics:

1) Strategic dimension

- How can the political commitment to the EUSDR be assessed and improved?
- What are best practice examples for promoting MRS on the political level?
- What is the impact and influence of EUSDR high-level meetings (e.g. Ministerial, Parliamentarian) on the EUSDR and on national/regional levels, and how can these be further enhanced in the future?
- What is the impact and influence of the High Level Group (HLG) and 4 TRIO PCY formats on the implementation of the Strategy, EUSDR and on national/regional levels, and how can these be further enhanced in the future?

2) Governance

- How can the roles and responsibilities among key stakeholders of the EUSDR be assessed? Where is room for improvement?
- Which workflows/processes work well and which should be improved?
- What is the impact of strong/well elaborated agendas (e.g. by the (TRIO) PCY) on the governance of the Strategy?
- How can the involvement of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) and the Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON) in the EUSDR be assessed? What are the learnings from the DYC (pilot project)?

3) Technical implementation and policy coordination

- How can the involvement of stakeholders in the EUSDR/PAs/SGs be improved?
- How has cooperation (intensity) between key stakeholder groups in the EUSDR changed over time? How can this cooperation be further improved?
- What are the main gaps prevailing in the technical implementation of the EUSDR?

4) Policy impact

- What concrete policy impact has been generated by the Strategy on regional, national and EU level? What are the territorial differences (e.g. urban vs. rural, in EU and EU accession countries)?
- What can be done to generate more strategic outputs/impact in the short-, mid- and long-term?
- How do changes in EUSDR structures (e.g. for action and decision-making) and processes determine policy impact?

5) Funding

- How can the (expected) absorption of different funding sources in the 2021-2027 programming period be assessed?
- How can the operation of EUSDR managing authority networks (ESF, CF/ERDF, IPA/NDICI) support and put into practice the embedding of EUSDR into funding programmes?
- How can cooperation among national/regional, EU and non-EU actors responsible for programming and programme implementation be ensured, in order to effectively monitor the outcomes of the aligning of EUSDR and different funding mechanisms, with special focus on synergies, avoiding overlaps and efficiency of work?
- What could be done to further develop synergies for the implementation of (strategic) projects and processes? How could the EUSDR improve the information flow on implemented (strategic) projects and processes in the twelve thematic fields?

The evaluation questions can, to a large extent, be answered by desk research taking into account existing data from previous evaluations, the EUSDR monitoring system and other documents and information sources as stated in chapter 2.4. The DSP, in cooperation with the SG DANUVAL, will further specify relevant data in the Terms of Reference.

To gain more detailed information in specific fields considered interesting and relevant for the evaluation, as well as to verify and/or update the data, concerned stakeholders shall be involved. Therefore, the evaluation questions need to be operationalised, broken down to a more detailed level and tailored to the target group (e.g. NCs, PACs, SG members, EC, DYC, programming/managing authorities etc.). The final set of questions as well as the methods for data collection and involvement of all relevant stakeholders are to be proposed by the evaluation experts. Depending on the target group and the methods chosen, the respective set of questions to be prepared could be similar to what is depicted below.

Table 1: Topics, aspects and possible questions for data collection (indicative, non-exhaustive)

Topic	Aspects to be covered	Possible questions for interviews, surveys etc.
Strategic dimension	<i>Political commitment, best practice for promoting MRS on EU, national / regional levels, planning of EUSDR's long-term vision and missions, high-level meetings, ministerial and parliamentary statements,</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could you please describe briefly 3 concrete achievements of the EUSDR at strategic level (e.g. change in the political agenda/visions/strategies, integration in national policy schemes, impact on national/regional/local laws, regulations etc.)? • What are best practice examples for promoting MRS on the political level in your country/region?

Topic	Aspects to be covered	Possible questions for interviews, surveys etc.
	<i>impact and influence of the HLG</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impetus of the Strategy is on decrease – do you agree with this statement? If yes, what could be done to improve the political commitment? Do you have recommendations on how to better involve the political level on EU, national/regional levels? • What is the impact and influence of the EUSDR Ministerial or Parliamentary statements/ meetings? Do you have recommendations for improvement? • What are the benefits of cross-MRS cooperation at strategic level (e.g. the High Level Group and 4 TRIO PCY meetings)? Where do you see unlocked potential in cross-MRS cooperation? • ...
Technical implementation	<i>Policy implementation and coordination, stakeholder involvement, participation in Steering Group meetings, organisation of Annual Fora</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you assess the composition, functioning and communication within your Steering Group (e.g. involvement, decision making, transparency...)? • How would you assess the cooperation structures you are involved in (at EUSDR/PA/national/regional level) and their impact on your Priority Area? • How has the cooperation between the key actors within the EUSDR changed over time? What has improved and where do you see further room for improvement? Can you suggest recommendations for improvement? • How has the cooperation intensity between EUSDR key actors and relevant external stakeholders changed over time? How can this cooperation be further improved? • Related to the technical implementation of the EUSDR in your PA/country, what works well? And could you describe concrete measures for improvement? • Which are the main gaps hindering cooperation/a sound implementation? • Which kind of support and from where would be needed to improve the implementation of the EUSDR? • How do you evaluate the importance of DRP contribution to the operation/implementation of EUSDR structures (PAs, DSP and DYC activities, Flagships, Annual Fora etc.)? • ...
Governance	<i>Roles and responsibilities, workflows and processes, Danube Youth Council</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did the roles and responsibilities in the EUSDR change over time (in general/your institution/ within DYC)? What has improved and what has not? • How would you describe the workflows and processes among the key implementers of the

Topic	Aspects to be covered	Possible questions for interviews, surveys etc.
		<p>Strategy at EUSDR (core stakeholder wise), PA and/or national, regional level? What works well and what needs to be improved?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have comments or suggestions for improvement on the EUSDR governance? • Can you identify the strengths of one workflow/process in the EUSDR that works well? What is the benefit of this workflow/process? • Can you identify the weakness of one workflow/process that needs to be improved? • Are there any relevant processes/agendas that can be (better) covered by workflows? • What influence do the agendas of the (TRIO-) Presidencies have on the relations between key stakeholders, work flows and processes? Can you name a concrete example? • How can the involvement of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) at governance and thematic level be assessed (e.g. in terms of frequency of attendance, quality of involvement/inputs provided, etc.)? • What are the lessons learned from the DYC project? What can be improved in the future on EUSDR/PA side and on the DYC side? • From your point of view, how would you assess the cooperation between the DYC and the DYON? How can this cooperation be further improved? • How and in which fields can the DYON contribute to the EUSDR? • What is needed for a successful development of the DYON and its active contribution to the EUSDR? • ...
Policy impact	<p><i>Update of the impact evaluation, capitalisation, cross-cutting initiatives, territorially differentiated view of the expected impact, long-term impact, how to generate more strategic outputs</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what level are the Priority Areas reaching the targets/objectives of the EUSDR Action Plan 2020? • Do you see the need of revising the EUSDR Action Plan 2020? If yes, what should be modified/adapted and in what timeframe? • Could you describe briefly from your point of view the most important thematic output/achievement of the EUSDR on regional, national and/or EU level? • What are territorial differences of the impact generated by the EUSDR/your PA (e.g. urban vs. rural, EU and accession countries)? • What concrete actions could be taken/implemented to generate more strategic outputs/long-term impact? • How do changes in EUSDR structures (e.g. for action and decision-making) and processes determine policy impact? Can you name a concrete example? • ...

Topic	Aspects to be covered	Possible questions for interviews, surveys etc.
Funding	<i>Embedding, funding of projects/processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From your point of view, what role does the EUSDR play in EU funding programmes 2021-2027 and has this role improved during the programming process and EUSDR’s embedding activities? If yes, do you have concrete examples you could provide? • How do you assess the (expected) absorption of funds from different programmes in your PA/country/region (e.g. time related, qualitative, quantitative, etc.)? • From your point of view, what could be done to effectively and efficiently monitor the outcomes of the implementation phase of the embedding process? Do you have recommendations how to use synergies and avoid overlaps? • What will be necessary in the next programming period 2027+, to further improve the embedding of the EUSDR into EU funded programmes? Can you name one specific measure that could be taken into consideration? • How could the EUSDR improve the information flow on implemented (strategic) projects and processes in the twelve thematic fields via the PA and SGs, in order to enlarge the awareness of the EUSDR, via the PAs, on the relevant (strategic) projects and processes implemented in the Region? • What do you think about the effectiveness of EUSDR networks of managing authorities (CF/ERDF; ESF+; IPA/NDICI)? • How has the embedding of EUSDR improved between 2014-2020 and 2021-2027 periods in centrally managed EU Programmes? • ...

Since an assessment dedicated to external communication will be performed in 2024, this topic will not be in focus of the Process/Implementation Evaluation. However, in order to use synergies, some questions on communication might be included in questionnaires/interviews among EUSDR core stakeholders.

3.2. Policy Evaluation

The second evaluation should focus primarily on the policy impact of the EUSDR and on embedding/funding. Furthermore, where relevant and depending on the processes and developments in the EUSDR until 2026/2027, an update of the process evaluation, including questions on the strategic dimension, the technical implementation and the governance of the EUSDR (e.g. assessment of the development of the DYC), as well as communication should also be considered. It might answer the following questions (be updated and further detailed in the updated Evaluation Plan and in the ToR):

- How are the Priority Areas proceeding in reaching (or planning to reach) their set targets? What should be changed in order to ensure that the objectives will be achieved?
- What (policy) impact has been generated (or can be expected to be generated) by the Strategy on national, regional or EU level?
- How did/does the Strategy contribute to wider policy objectives (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals, TA 2030, European Green Deal, Digitalisation, EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy etc.)?
- How efficient was the EUSDR embedding process in terms of programming (planning phase) and funding (implementation phase) 2021-2027?
- How can the EUSDR's/PA's absorption of different funding sources in the 2021-2027 programming period be assessed?
- Which role is the Strategy (EUSDR and MRS in general) expected to play in the EU funding programmes 2028-2034?
- What could be done to further improve the embedding of the EUSDR into EU funded programmes 2028-2034?
- How has the involvement of stakeholders in the EUSDR/PAs/SGs changed over time? What could be done to further improve the stakeholders' involvement at different levels?
- How has the Danube Youth Council developed since the start of the pilot project in 2022? What could be further improved to involve the young generation in the EUSDR at governance and thematic levels?
- How has the EUSDR's internal and external communication changed over time? What could be done to further improve communication flows and visibility of the EUSDR at different levels?

Examples of questions for the Policy Evaluation can be found below (the final set of questions is to be proposed by the external evaluators, based on the updated evaluation questions and the chosen methods for data collection):

Table 2: Exemplary topics and questions for the Policy Evaluation

Topic	Aspects to be covered	Possible questions for interviews, surveys etc.
Policy impact	<i>Update of the impact evaluation, capitalisation, cross-cutting initiatives, territorially differentiated view of the expected impact, long-term impact, how to generate more strategic outputs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the Priority Areas proceeding in reaching the targets/objectives of the EUSDR Action Plan? • Could you describe briefly from your point of view the most important output/achievement of the EUSDR on regional, national and/or EU level? • What are territorial differences of the impact generated by the EUSDR/your PA (e.g. urban vs. rural)? • How did the Strategy/PAs contribute to wider policy objectives (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals, TA 2030, European Green Deal, Digitalisation, EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy etc.)? • What are the benefits of the EUSDR and MRS in general to support accession countries? • What could be done to generate more strategic outputs/long-term impact?

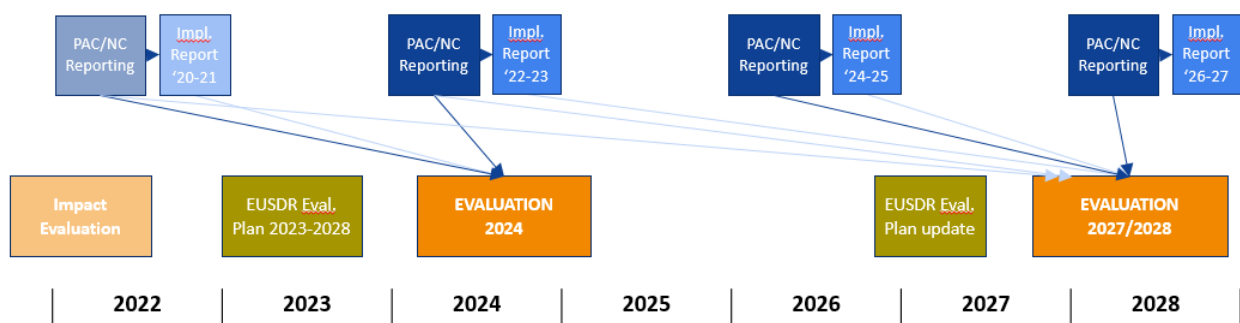
Topic	Aspects to be covered	Possible questions for interviews, surveys etc.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which role could the EUSDR play in the new Cohesion policy post-2027? • What topics and activities could the EUSDR promote within the discussion and preparations of the Cohesion policy post-2027? • ...
Funding	<i>Embedding, funding of projects/processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How successful was the absorption of funds from different programmes (in your PA/country)? • How would you assess the actual achievements regarding funding of projects, compared to the planned measures in the embedding process? • Which cross-funded initiatives are there to be found? • What activities are being carried out to ensure that relevant EUSDR priorities are included in 2027-2034 planning and programming documents? • How are EUSDR stakeholders (NCs, PACs, SG members) involved in the programming of national/regional funding programmes? What could be done to further improve their involvement in the programming of national/regional funding programmes? • Which role is the EUSDR expected to play in the EU funding programmes 2028-2034? • What could be done to further improve the embedding of the EUSDR into EU funded programmes 2028-2034? • ...
Strategic dimension	<i>Political commitment, best practice for promoting MRS, planning of vision and missions, high-level meetings,...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the main achievements of the EUSDR at strategic level? • How has the political commitment changed over time and what could be done to further promote the EUSDR on political level? • ...
Technical implementation	<i>Policy implementation and coordination, stakeholder involvement, participation in Steering Group meetings, organisation of Annual Fora</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the cooperation intensity between EUSDR key actors and other relevant stakeholders changed over time? How can this cooperation be further improved? • Related to the technical implementation of the EUSDR in your PA/country, what works well? And where do you see room for improvement? • Which kind of support would be needed to improve the implementation of the EUSDR? • ...
Governance	<i>Roles and responsibilities, workflows and processes, Danube Youth Council</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you have comments or suggestions for improvement on the EUSDR governance? • Which workflows/processes work well and which should be improved? • How can the involvement of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) at governance and thematic level be assessed?

Topic	Aspects to be covered	Possible questions for interviews, surveys etc.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the Danube Youth Council developed since the start of the pilot project in 2022? • What could be further improved to involve the young generation in the EUSDR? • ...
Communication	<i>Internal communication flows, efficiency and effectiveness of communication measures, visibility among external target groups</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How satisfied are you with the Strategy's internal communication? Do you have concrete suggestions to further improve the communication flows between EUSDR key stakeholders? • In your perception, how effective are different online tools, publications, events and media in reaching the external target groups (institutional/government and civil society/business sector)? • In your opinion, what could be done to further improve the visibility among external target groups?

4. Timing

According to the EUSDR monitoring concept, PACs are reporting on the progress and achievements of Priority Areas every second year via the online reporting tool, in line with the reporting periods of the EC⁴ (expected in spring 2024, 2026 and 2028). At the same time, NCs are reporting directly to the EC via the questionnaire for the reports on the implementation of the four EU macro-regional strategies. As these reports are among the main information sources for the evaluations, the evaluation activities shall be aligned to the reporting timeframes.

The following illustration depicts the planned evaluation activities until 2028, dependent on the main EUSDR reporting/monitoring requirements⁵.



The following preliminary timeline is foreseen for the Process/Implementation Evaluation (to be further detailed in the ToR):

Nov. – Dec. 2023	Preparation of the ToR
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⁴ Questionnaire for the 'Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies'

⁵ Excluding the PAC reporting to the DRP

Jan. – March 2024	Tendering/Procurement, decision/selection of the provider
March – May 2024	Starting phase, clarification of data requirements, final agreement on methodology and approach (<i>Kick-off meeting, Inception Report</i>)
June – Sept. 2024	Data collection & analysis, preliminary conclusions & recommendations (<i>Interim Report</i>)
Oct. – Dec. 2024	Further data analysis, discussion of results, conclusions & recommendations (<i>Draft Final Report</i>)
Jan. – March 2025	Incorporation of feedback, finalisation of evaluation, communication of results (<i>Final Evaluation Report</i>)

For the Policy Evaluation, the timeline could look as depicted below (to be further detailed in the updated Evaluation Plan and in the ToR):

July – Oct. 2027	Preparation of the ToR, Tendering/Procurement, decision/selection of the provider
Nov. – Dec. 2027	Starting phase, clarification of data requirements, final agreement on methodology and approach (<i>Kick-off meeting, Inception Report</i>)
Jan. – April. 2028	First phase of data collection & analysis, preliminary conclusions (<i>Interim Report</i>)
May – August 2028	Second phase of data collection (incl. reporting 2028), data analysis, discussion of results, conclusions & recommendations (<i>Draft Final Report</i>)
Sept. – Nov. 2028	Incorporation of feedback, finalisation of evaluation, communication of results (<i>Final Evaluation Report</i>)