

**Austrian Presidency of the EU-Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)
01.11.2023 – 31.12.2024**

***Shaping Transformation, Creating Opportunities:
A Prosperous, Resilient and Secure Danube Region***

Austria holds the EUSDR Presidency from 1 November 2023 until 31 December 2024, taking over from Slovenia. Since 2014, when Austria first held the EUSDR Presidency, the world and the Danube Region have undergone fundamental change.

In the past 10 years, the EUSDR and its participating countries have taken a big leap forward in deepening cooperation and grown stronger as a macro-region. Today, the EUSDR consists of EU member states and EU accession countries only – another proof that European integration along the Danube is progressing successfully.

At the same time, Europe and its regions are currently facing fundamental and far-reaching transformations: from geopolitical shifts, demographic changes and growing social imbalance, to the energy transition, and the profound transformation of our working environment, caused by skills shortage and digitalization. The impact of climate change – with rising temperatures and sea levels as well as droughts and floods – is increasingly apparent and disrupting the lives of millions of people, not least in the Danube Region. These challenges and developments call for intensified cooperation across borders.

The Russian Federation's illegal full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, EUSDR member state and EUSDR Presidency in 2022, has fundamentally changed the world, Europe and, of course, the Danube Region. This blatant violation of international law and the rules-based order, the illegal annexation of parts of Ukraine, ongoing bloodshed, suffering, indiscriminate strikes against civilians and civilian infrastructure, humanitarian emergencies and instability as well as migration flows have led to a tectonic shift. This shift has already created a new, strong momentum for political, economic, humanitarian and military solidarity, commitments and support for Ukraine. It has also intensified the need for continued solidarity, macro-regional cooperation and coordination in the Danube Region and beyond, which must remain at the core of our agenda over the coming years.

When the Russian Federation terminated its participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative in July 2023, the Danube River suddenly became the most important lifeline for the export of Ukrainian grain. The lives of millions of people in low-income countries around the world depend on grain shipments from Ukraine. Efforts to increase the capacity of Ukrainian and Romanian Danube River ports and to rebuild shipping infrastructure after severe damage from Russian airstrikes are ongoing. These endeavours have brought EUSDR countries even closer together as they rally around the common goal of feeding the world and securing agricultural revenues for Ukraine.

The Danube Region covers an area of more than 800.000 km² with a population of around 115 million people between the Black Forest and the Black Sea, making it the world's most

international river basin. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region is a policy and cooperation framework that calls for stronger political and thematic cooperation between the 14 countries – nine EU Member States and five EU accession countries. Now more than ever, as socio-economic disparities among and within these countries persist, there is a need for reinforced cooperation to address cross-border challenges and boost regional cohesion. Furthermore, the EUSDR can unlock the full potential of the whole region by actively contributing to the European integration of accession countries.

Austria has always supported close and efficient cooperation among the Danube countries, taking the initiative, together with Romania, for the establishment of EUSDR almost 15 years ago. From the very start, Austria has been highly active, i.a. as chair of three EUSDR Priority Areas. We are also proud to co-host the Danube Strategy Point, the EUSDR's Secretariat and strategic support structure, in Vienna.

As emphasised in the 2022 European Commission Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, the EUSDR together with the other three macro-regional strategies (MRS) - are very useful cooperation frameworks establishing networks of stakeholders that form a transnational, cross-sectorial mosaic of expertise with a potential for further cooperation, value and prosperity action. MRS also facilitate the implementation of core European political initiatives, such as the European Green Deal and the European Year of Skills, across their territories, aligning and coordinating them with regional and local initiatives. EUSDR and the other MRS are therefore powerful tools to support economic, social and territorial development and to build macro-regional identity, trust and confidence among neighbouring countries.

The Council, in its Conclusions on 27 June 2023, welcomed the Commission Report and recognized the findings therein. Furthermore, the Council underlined the importance of participating countries' continuous political commitment and ownership of the Strategies at all levels, and the importance of the Commission's contribution as strategic advisor providing operational support, both technical and financial. In its conclusions, the Council pointed also to the role the Strategies can play in the enlargement process.

The EUSDR is built around four Pillars: Connecting the Region, Protecting the Environment, Building Prosperity, Strengthening the Region. It has already proven its value by directing attention to the Danube Region and bringing together stakeholders from across sectors, countries and governance levels to solve common challenges and cooperate in strategic areas, from transport and connectivity, competitiveness and skills, to security and the environment, culture and tourism.

Under the slogan '**Shaping Transformation, Creating Opportunities: A Prosperous, Resilient and Secure Danube Region**', the Austrian EUSDR Presidency will focus on the importance of cooperation on the following **three thematic priorities**:

1) Contributing to Stability and Security, and a clear European Perspective for the whole Danube Region

- Enhancing the European integration of the **Western Balkans & Eastern European EUSDR partners** by positioning EUSDR as an important asset of the **EU enlargement process** in the current geopolitical context.

- Supporting the **stability, recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine** and providing **assistance to the Republic of Moldova**.

EUSDR as a 'laboratory for accession' enables cooperation and coordination between the EU and accession countries on an equal footing. Based on the achievements of the Slovenian EUSDR and the Bosnian and Herzegovinian EUSAIR presidencies in 2023, Austria will continue to pursue a result-oriented contribution of EUSDR to an **accelerated EU enlargement process** through all relevant EUSDR Priority areas. The Austrian presidency will cooperate closely with the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region involving the European Commission (in particular DG REGIO and DG NEAR), IPA and NDICI programs/coordinators as well as other relevant stakeholders within and beyond the Danube Region.

In 2022, Ukraine was the first non-EU country to hold the EUSDR Presidency. During its Presidency, Austria will explore how to support the **recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine**, i.a. through a matchmaking initiative involving relevant EUSDR Priority Areas and their Coordinators, based on the experiences of a similar initiative in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region.

Initiatives and projects with a clear impact on peace, stability and security in the Danube Region will be given special attention during Austria's Presidency, focussing i.a. on combatting international arms trade, human- and drug-trafficking. Furthermore, Austria is planning to involve EUSDR countries in its Presidency of the "Salzburg Forum".

2) Fostering Innovation, Skills and Business Opportunities in the Danube Region

- Fostering **Research & Innovation** in the Danube Region
- Boosting **Skills and Competences**
- Enhancing **Competitiveness and Business Opportunities including Tourism**

Making the Danube Region more resilient and sustainable in the long-term by building stronger, cleaner and fairer economies and societies requires channelling the power of innovation. During its Presidency, Austria will capitalise on recently launched European Commission initiatives: "Partnerships for Regional Innovation" (PRI) and "Regional Innovation Valleys". We will convene relevant stakeholders in order to assess progress in the establishment of the **Danube Strategy Flagship "Danube Tech Valley Initiative" (DTVI)**, a pilot project under the "Regional Innovation Valleys". Its main aim is to enhance cooperation of research and innovation eco-systems at the regional level and addressing the innovation divide.

Demographic change and the shortage of skilled labour is a growing issue for the European Union overall and the Danube Region in particular. We will build on ongoing activities of Priority Area 9, where Austria, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine have been coordinating cooperation among the 14 EUSDR countries in the field of labour market and education policies for several years. The Austrian Presidency will promote the organization of a **PA 9 stakeholder conference on 'people and skills'**, addressing skills development initiatives across the Danube region - in particular in the context of the green and digital transitions - and bringing organisations and people together to share their experiences.

The Austrian EUSDR Presidency will also convene participants from EUSDR countries in the framework of a **High-level Danube Region Business Forum**. It will focus on skills, vocational education and training as well as business opportunities through circular economy and near-shoring, with a strong focus on the private sector. Business representatives, in particular from the tourism & cruising industry of EUSDR countries will be invited to join an **International Danube Navigation and Tourism Conference** on best practices for Tourism and Cruises on the Danube River.

3) Enhancing the Danube Region Ecosystem, Water and Green Transition Management

- Supporting **sustainable waterway mobility** and managing green transformation
- Enabling **innovative and resilient Water and River Basin Management**
- Harnessing the potential of **circular economy** and **digitalization**

Current key topics of the Danube Region Ecosystem cover climate change impacts, drought and Water Resources & Management, integrated Danube River Basin Management as well as innovative technologies for sustainable waterway mobility.

The Austrian Presidency will engage multiple stakeholders to tackle the different aspects, based on the outstanding work already done in the framework of EUSDR's Priority Areas 1a (Waterways Mobility), 1b (Rail-Road-Air Mobility), 2 (Sustainable Energy), 4 (Water Quality), 5 (Environmental Risks) and 6 (Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality).

Beyond the EUSDR institutional set-up, Austria is looking to involve relevant initiatives and stakeholders under the EUSDR umbrella, including the **International Commission for the Protection of the Danube (ICPDR)**, the **Danube Commission (DC)** and the **International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC)**, enabling the broad participation of civil society representatives of EUSDR countries. We will connect to flagship projects such as **DANUBE4all**, **FAIRway Danube** as well as the **UN Danube Water Program** and seek synergies and cooperation with other high-level events such as INTERPRAEVENT 2024.

A process for an updated **“Joint Statement on Guiding Principles for the Development of Inland Navigation and Environmental Protection in the Danube River Basin”** will be initiated by ICPDR, DC and ISRBC during the Austrian EUSDR Presidency. EUSDR PA1a will support the elaboration process. Key elements of such an innovative and integrative approach towards river management will feed into the **Danube Transport Ministerial Conclusions**, envisaged for spring 2024.

The availability of and dependence on building materials, the issue of land consumption and the CO2 emissions of the construction industry are key and pressing issues in the Danube Region. To contend with the twin issue of scarcity of raw materials and climate change we will address the practical importance of **circular economy** through the presentation of strategies, procedures and policies, as well as drawing on practical experiences in the areas of **digitalization in construction**.

Across these three focus areas, Austria will pursue the participation and involvement of **Youth and Civil society** and **regional and local stakeholders** and promote **cultural cooperation in the Danube Region** by

- further developing the **Danube Youth Council** and the establishment of a **Danube Youth Organisations Network**,
- enhancing the involvement of **civil society**,
- involving **regions, cities and municipalities** for closer cooperation in the Danube Region.

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region has recognised the importance of integrating **younger generations** into its governance structure, reaching out to young people and empowering them to realise their visions and expectations in/for the Danube Region. In its pilot phase, the **Danube Youth Council (DYC)** has already proven to be a clear asset. Built upon this success, the Austrian EUSDR Presidency will continue to involve the DYC and young people from the region and ensure their active participation in the EUSDR's governance at all levels. The EUSDR Austrian Presidency will support further work on the establishment of a **Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON)**.

In order to translate the common European and EUSDR challenges into local contexts, Austria will strive to involve new communities and broaden the scope of outreach. This includes supporting the establishment of **"EU local councillors"** in municipalities and cities across Austria, as a possible model for other EUSDR participating countries, and the Austrian Leadership Programs (ALPS) focussing on **Young Leaders from the Danube Region** in 2024. The Austrian Presidency will also enhance cooperation with universities, academia and think tanks, i.a. through the **Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC)** under Austrian Chairmanship.

The **Flagship Participation Day** architecture, with its **National and Danube Participation Days** are long-established, tangible and visible endeavours to connect civil society representatives with local, regional, national and European public administrations as well as other EUSDR stakeholders. The **Danube Participation Day**, held back-to-back with the **2024 Annual Forum in Vienna**, will provide fora for debate and exchange for civil society from the entire Danube Region. The 2024 National Participation day will seek to kick-start and inspire work on '**A vision for the Danube Region 2040**'.

Harnessing the insight from the regional and local levels, the Austrian EUSDR Presidency will focus on how the Strategy directly impacts citizens in the Danube Region, by enhancing roles and capacities for regions, cities and municipalities. This approach will bring EUSDR closer to citizens, and vice-versa, EUSDR will profit from new impulses from regional and local levels. A **Conference of Mayors of EUSDR Capitals** will be organised in Vienna during the **Annual Forum in Vienna 2024**.

The Austrian EUSDR Presidency will pursue the following **institutional and governance objectives**:

1. Strengthening **political commitment and broad ownership of EUSDR**, involving Danube Region stakeholders in a comprehensive way
2. Continuing joint efforts to enable **tangible funding opportunities**
3. Illustrating the **clear added value of EUSDR** at local, regional, national and European levels and ensure visibility, i.a. by highlighting **Danube Strategy Flagships and Danube Region Programme (DRP) projects**.

Strong political commitment and ownership among all stakeholders is key to the success of EUSDR and other macro-regional strategies. While much has been achieved, more remains to be done. The Austrian EUSDR Presidency will involve a **broad variety of stakeholders in the Danube Region, and far beyond the EUSDR family** – from politics, civil society, youth, to business, the private sector and international organisations – and invite them to participate actively in the implementation of the Presidency program and its thematic clusters. Structured and strategic cooperation with relevant stakeholders in the Danube Region is key to its success. To ensure a steady political ownership, Austria will continue to **strengthen the parliamentary dimension of EUSDR** by organising the **Conference of the Presidents of the Danube Parliaments** and by **involving Members of the European Parliament** in the implementation of the Presidency Program.

Joint efforts to enable **tangible funding opportunities and successful ‘embedding’** will continue during Austria’s EUSDR Presidency, resulting in a more efficient alignment of EUSDR initiatives and projects with EU, national and regional funds. We will continue close cooperation between the EUSDR and the Interreg Danube Region Programme to jointly strive for enhanced synergies. This will foster a sound implementation of the Strategy and produce concrete project results, including a proper monitoring of these outcomes.

With **concrete success stories and flagship initiatives**, Austria will exemplify the **added value of EUSDR at all levels**, sharing the EUSDR experience on the ground, especially at the regional and local levels. It is crucial to focus on **tangible and realistic deliverables and outcomes at national, regional and local levels**.

In reference to the **Council conclusions on MRS in June 2023** and the **Slovenian announcement for EUSDR to enter the decade of the future**, the Austrian EUSDR Presidency is planning to organise a follow-up discussion among EUSDR stakeholders on those recommendations aimed at identifying **key messages and processes on future perspectives for EUSDR by end of 2024**.

Austria will ensure continuity in the implementation of the EUSDR Action plan, provide guidance and support to stakeholders, promote cooperation among EUSDR countries and chair core governance processes. The Presidency will represent EUSDR in the meetings with other macro-regional strategies, the European Commission and external stakeholders. Based on the committed work of the Slovenian EUSDR Presidency, **efforts to further improve governance and 'back-office' effectiveness will continue**. These include enhancing cross-MRS cooperation, i.a. in the framework of the “MRS Trio Presidencies” format, and sharing best practices among the four macro-regional Strategies.

We acknowledge the leading role of the EUSDR Priority Areas and their Steering Groups as drivers of the day-to-day implementation, and the strategic support and committed work of the Danube Strategy Point.

The Presidency programme will be implemented via:

- EUSDR core governance meetings
 - (Joint) meetings of EUSDR National Coordinators and EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators; each preceded by a meeting of the EUSDR Trio Presidency
 - Steering Group Meetings of EUSDR Priority Areas

- Other high level meetings & stakeholder conferences under the auspices of the Austrian EUSDR Presidency (see calendar below)
- Main events will be the **14th EUSDR Annual Forum in Vienna 2024**, preceded by the 11th Danube Participation Day, and the **Meeting of the Danube Foreign Ministers**.

Even as the Danube Region sails through rough waters, Austria will do its utmost to use its EUSDR Presidency term to

- identify opportunities for an even closer cooperation among the Danube Region countries and regions,
- highlight the clear added value of EUSDR and its projects,
- bring the Strategy closer to its citizens, and together with all EUSDR partner countries,
- continue to build a prosperous, resilient and secure Danube Region with a healthy environment, using all opportunities to their full potential to make it an attractive place to live.