



The Danube Region in 2040:

A vision developed by the Danube Youth Council

About the Danube Youth Council

The **Danube Youth Council (DYC)** has been established as of **October 2022** as a structure for institutional involvement of young people in all EUSDR bodies, to make ideas and viewpoints of young people heard and considered on a political level.

The DYC is composed of **28 members (18 – 29 years of age)**, 2 members from each of the 14 Danube Region countries (Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine). The members of the Youth Council may:

- ◆ propose concrete actions and projects and suggest topics
- ◆ bring ideas to the attention of high-level politicians from EUSDR states and regions
- ◆ contribute to the EUSDR priorities and policies
- ◆ raise attention to the special features of their regions at the transnational level
- ◆ participate in all youth activities of EUSDR
- ◆ participate in EUSDR events as well as international and EU-related youth events.

For the first 13 months of its existence (1 October 2022 – 31 October 2023), the Danube Youth Council was funded as a Pilot Action by the European Commission and co-funded by the City of Vienna. Starting on 1 November 2023, the Danube Youth Council moved from the Pilot Action to long-term implementation. A long-term financing concept was endorsed by EUSDR National Coordinators (NCs) and ensures that the DYC members can continue to contribute to the EUSDR in the long run.

Our vision for the future of the Danube Region

This vision statement delineates the core priorities for the future of the Danube Region until 2040, outlining our perspective across several key areas:



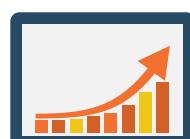
Sustainable Development



Cooperation, Peace, and Security



Science, Technology and Innovation



Economic Cooperation and Finance



Youth Participation and Governance

It was written in spring 2024 and was presented at the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum in June 2024 in Vienna, Austria, organised under the Austrian EUSDR Presidency.

Chapter 1: Sustainable Development

Sustainability is a fundamental need of the modern world, addressing which would allow to overcome environmental challenges, social inequalities, and economic instabilities faced by countries on their path to integrated and balanced development. The Danube Region encounters diverse challenges that require a transnationally coordinated response. Sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation, environmental protection, and ensuring social justice are key to achieving long-term prosperity in the region. For the effective implementation of sustainable development in the Danube Region, it is important to focus on four key dimensions: **economic dimension, ecological dimension, social dimension, and international cooperation**. Each of these areas includes various initiatives and approaches that collectively aim for harmonious development of the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ◆ Creating favourable conditions for investments in green projects, such as renewable energy sources, green building, and environmentally friendly transport.
- ◆ Prioritise energy efficiency solutions upon renewable energy sources and building new technologies.
- ◆ Reduce consumption of fossil fuels and increase the energy security of the region, through investing in own sources and grids, rather than finding short term solutions through import of resources.
- ◆ Implementing tax incentives and grant programmes for startups and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) working in the field of sustainable development.
- ◆ Protecting endemic species, rehabilitating damaged ecosystems, establishing and supporting natural reserves and national parks.
- ◆ Implementing sustainable water use practices, reducing water pollution, and improving the quality of drinking water.
- ◆ Developing infrastructure for waste processing, reducing the volume of solid and hazardous wastes
- ◆ Creating conditions for access to resources and services without discrimination, promoting social integration of marginalised groups
- ◆ Developing joint projects in resource management, nature conservation, and social development.
- ◆ Implementing European regulations and standards into national legislation to harmonise sustainable development policies.
- ◆ Engaging support from the EU, UN, and other international institutions for funding projects and initiatives.

Chapter 2: Enhanced peace and security through cooperation

Cooperation, peace and security are the fundamental pillars on which the stability and development of the Danube Region rests, which includes fourteen countries and a multitude of ethnic, linguistic and cultural communities. In the context of the challenges of organised crime, the threat of terrorism, corruption and undermined rule of law and a war in Europe, it is important to build sustainable cooperation and security mechanisms that will ensure wellbeing and prosperity for all residents of the region, especially the young generation and most vulnerable groups.

Cooperation between the countries of the Danube Region is essential for overcoming macro-regional challenges. Open and efficient dialogue between states and international organisations such as the Danube Commission play a key role in preserving peace and security in the region.

Young people have an important role in promoting a culture of tolerance and inclusive society. Educating young people about the importance of intercultural dialogue and human rights are key to creating future generations who will represent the values of democracy and human rights.

Through the joint effort of all stakeholders – governments, private sector, civil society, academia and youth –, peace and security in the Danube Region can be enhanced. By spreading awareness of the importance of mutual support, understanding and solidarity, we can build a sustainable community that will prosper in accordance with the values of peace and democracy while following a human rights approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ◆ Reaffirming diplomacy, dialogue and legal methods as the primary means for the peaceful settlement of international disputes, but also as means to enhance international cooperation especially within the Danube Region.
- ◆ Committing to developing new, and revitalising existing, confidence-building and crisis management mechanisms. We recognise these mechanisms as critical tools to prevent confrontation between Member States. We further commit to supporting mediation efforts.
- ◆ Emphasising that such enforcement action, including in counter-terrorism contexts, must be accompanied by inclusive political efforts and must be based on full compliance with obligations under international law, including the UN Charter and relevant international conventions and protocols, in particular

- international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law.
- ◆ Stresses the importance of cooperation among the states of the Danube Region with European and international judicial bodies, facilitating the smooth exercise of jurisdiction and enforcement of legal decisions, safeguarding the rule of law and impartial justice.
 - ◆ Promoting intercultural dialogue: Organising workshops, seminars and cultural events that encourage dialogue between young people from different countries of the Danube Region in order to build understanding, respect and friendship between different communities.
 - ◆ Support for civil society initiatives: Providing funds and resources for civil society organisations that deal with the promotion of peace, non-violent conflict resolution and the protection of human rights in the region.

Chapter 3: Science, Technology and Innovation

In a rapidly changing society, the Danube Region faces new opportunities as well as challenges and needs. These include crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the triple planetary crisis, elections, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and quantum technologies.

As a macro-regional strategy, the EUSDR involves a diverse group of countries seeking to meet their environmental, social and economic needs. Science, technology and innovation sectors within the region are highly relevant and must be considered as an integral part of policy making, capacity building and strategy development. In order to meet the needs and demands of the region, joint initiatives have to be taken across the Danube Region in the respective sectors. Moreover, to achieve the goals of the Agenda 2030, Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) serves as an indispensable tool to accelerate progress towards the goal.

In order to follow a whole-of-society approach, inclusive, gender-responsive and multi-stakeholder actions need to be taken. It is crucial to promote capacity building, knowledge sharing and cooperation among all levels (local, regional, national, international) and sectors (public, private, civil and academia). The Danube Region is home to more than 70 universities and hundreds of research institutes and other scientific institutions. Their common goal is to promote scientific research and innovation for the benefit of social and economic processes.

It is important that regulatory frameworks are put in place across the Danube Region to harness the benefits of new technologies. Innovation is emerging as a lynchpin for progress and resilience. As the region grapples with multiple challenges and seeks to capitalise on

emerging opportunities, fostering a culture of innovation becomes paramount. Innovation serves as a catalyst that transforms scientific knowledge and technological advances into tangible solutions that drive economic growth, social progress and environmental sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ◆ Development of regulatory Frameworks which harness the good in emerging technologies while mitigating risks and challenges while following the goals of the Agenda 2030.
- ◆ Increase public funding for research and development (R&D) infrastructure, including laboratories, testing facilities, and technology parks, to support innovation and commercialisation of technology.
- ◆ Promote sustainability and environmental responsibility within the technology sector by incentivising the development of clean energy technologies, promoting circular economy practices, and supporting startups and research initiatives focused on environmental conservation.
- ◆ Improve digital infrastructure, including broadband connectivity and digital services, to enable the widespread adoption of technology and facilitate the growth of digital businesses and services.
- ◆ Facilitate cross-border collaboration and knowledge sharing among countries in the Danube Region to leverage complementary strengths, share best practices, and address common challenges. Establish collaborative research programmes, joint funding mechanisms, and innovation networks to promote regional cooperation in STI.
- ◆ Invest in education and training programmes to develop digital skills among the workforce with a special focus on a gender inclusive approach, ensuring that the region has the talent pool necessary to drive technological innovation and growth.
- ◆ Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact of STI policies and initiatives in the Danube Region. Regularly monitor key indicators such as research output, innovation performance, technology adoption rates, and socio-economic impact to inform evidence-based policymaking and continuous improvement effort.

Chapter 4: Economic Cooperation and Finance

The Danube Region is at a crossroads in its economic path, distinguished by a rich history of cooperation, current collaborative institutions, and a road of problems and opportunities. Since the past, the Danube River has functioned as a commercial and cultural exchange route, generating economic exchanges that have impacted the region's growth. However, occurring challenges may destabilise the ongoing progress within the trade sector in the region and have an adverse effect on its sustainable economic growth. Continued regional cooperation, aided by initiatives such as the EUSDR, will be critical to overcoming these obstacles and realising the Danube Region's vision of a thriving and integrated future. Only by working together and embracing innovation and sustainability, the Danube Region can pave the way for long-term prosperity and a brighter future for future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ◆ Addressing regulatory barriers by harmonising legal frameworks and administrative procedures across Danube-bordering countries.
- ◆ Establishing mechanisms for regular dialogue and coordination between regulatory authorities to streamline cross-border trade and investment.
- ◆ Prioritising investments in transport, digital connectivity, and energy networks to improve infrastructure and facilitate the efficient movement of goods, people, and information.
- ◆ Promoting public-private partnerships and international cooperation to fund and implement large-scale infrastructure projects.
- ◆ Strengthening initiatives like the Danube Business Forum to enhance private sector engagement, entrepreneurship, and innovation.
- ◆ Providing support mechanisms such as access to finance, market information, professional exchange programmes and mentorship to encourage SME growth and competitiveness.
- ◆ Encouraging institutional cooperation and trust-building measures among Danube-bordering countries to overcome historical tensions and foster mutual understanding.
- ◆ Facilitating joint initiatives in key areas such as infrastructure development, research, and innovation to leverage collective capabilities and resources.
- ◆ Adopting sustainable development goals (SDGs) and green growth strategies to promote environmental stewardship, resource efficiency, and social inclusion.

- ◆ Encouraging investments in renewable energy, eco-friendly tourism, and circular economy practices to achieve long-term economic growth while mitigating environmental risks.
- ◆ Anticipating and adapting to future trends such as technological innovation, demographic changes, and globalisation to ensure the Danube Region's competitiveness.
- ◆ Sustaining and expanding existing cooperative mechanisms like the Danube Region Strategy, Danube Region Programme, and Danube Investment Framework to promote regional integration and collaboration.
- ◆ Leveraging the Danube Region's strategic location and historical ties to strengthen partnerships with neighbouring regions and international stakeholders.

Chapter 5: Youth Involvement and Governance

The youth commend the continued support accorded to our evolving needs and welcome the tremendous efforts to safeguard our future by formulating mechanisms that address current and ensuing challenges, bringing forth intergenerational justice and accountability.

We acknowledge the significance of youth within the EUSDR and support the recommendations of promoting meaningful, inclusive, and effective engagement of youth, youth-led, and youth-focused organisations in the work of the EUSDR.

To think and act in the interest of future generations, there is a need for the EUSDR to facilitate statements that will call for EUSDR member states to align government branches with youth-centric policies for better governance and resource distribution.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- ◆ For the further structural development of youth participation in the EUSDR, we recommend to enable practical, concrete, physical encounters and interaction between young people on an equal footing in MRS structures and governance and other EU policy levels.
- ◆ Fostering leadership capacities for young people in the Danube Region while simultaneously aiming to be approachable and inclusive for different societal spheres and people with differing backgrounds and experiences.
- ◆ Generate an exchange platform between the different EUSDR stakeholders, NGOs, the DYC and the DYON to use synergies.

- ◆ Reaffirm the importance of open, rights-based, and self-organised youth engagement in the work of the EUSDR.
- ◆ Propose measures to institutionalise youth engagement in decision-making processes and committees, ensuring their voices are heard, considered and incorporated in response to matters that affect them.
- ◆ Establish standards for data privacy and safeguarding mechanisms concerning youth engagement. This would build trust in digital platforms and protect the sensitive information of young participants.
- ◆ Allocate adequate resources to youth engagement mechanisms – including in the EUSDR, multilateral and regional levels, and national and community levels – to facilitate meaningful and inclusive engagement that would avail safe spaces that encourage collective youth action.
- ◆ Establish “youth equity” into official EUSDR terminology and define the concept as providing equitable resources and opportunities for youth and future generations.
- ◆ Encourage youth to partake in virtual and in-person conferences and events, with supports given, allowing further engagement with other leaders and member states.
- ◆ Ensure that youth is mandatorily involved as signatories in EUSDR Pacts, Decisions, and Policies in order to actively promote youth and children involvement in promoting development.
- ◆ Encourage and support the youth in areas of their strength and interest, especially via education, sports and entertainment through grassroots organisations, youth and youth-led organisations as a means to empower them and prevent from participation in dangerous activities including but not limited to crime and terrorism.
- ◆ Provide financial support, mentorship, and resources to amplify youth-led initiatives that focus on conflict prevention and de-escalation, dialogue, and community engagement.