

Guidance Paper 2024 for Embedding the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) into EU Programmes

“ACTIVE EMBEDDING & PLANNING AHEAD”

Focussing on both practical steps for further alignment of the EUSDR and programmes in the implementation phase and preparing the ground for the Embedding 2027-plus

prepared in cooperation with the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), July/August 2024



Austrian Presidency
of the EU Strategy
for the Danube Region

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1. Introduction and objectives

The Austrian EUSDR Presidency supports the continuation of the successful embedding process in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) running since 2019.

Taking into account the overall context of the year 2024 and considering the specific opportunities and potentials for progressing the embedding during this year – a double effort/focus is proposed:

- continuing the exchange of experience on efforts and good practice in aiming for an effective embedding in the implementation phase of relevant programmes
- taking stock of achievements, lessons-learned and perspectives so far and starting to put those in context of the upcoming debate about future perspectives post-2027

Building on specific experiences in Austria in working on embedding with Interreg Cross-border cooperation (CBC) programmes, an additional focus could be given on the question how to build embedding links between the EUSDR and the Interreg programmes.

Thus, one focus of this guidance paper is on how the utilisation of the EUSDR embedding process can ease an alignment of Interreg CBC and transnational programmes with macro-regional strategies (MRS)/EUSDR, how multi-annual programme planning can be exemplified using the Austrian programme cycle and how these two approaches can be translated into the future discussion on the post-2027 process.

2. Learnings from the strategic implementation, further development and utilisation of the EUSDR embedding process

In order to embed the EUSDR into EU programmes, a comprehensive and holistic approach was chosen in the Danube Region. This approach considered the existing realities, such as the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan in 2019/2020, strategic guidance by the EUSDR Presidencies, and support by EC/DG REGIO, as well as the development and involvement of individual (EUSDR and external) stakeholder groups.

The embedding work also required an understanding of the embedding procedures and technicalities, a flexible process design, and adaptations in implementation, rather than a chronological approach. The Strategy has developed, implemented and institutionalised corresponding tools and activities to support the work of the EUSDR core stakeholders and managing/programming authorities in the embedding process¹.

¹ Further information on the process and the embedding tools: <https://danube-region.eu/projects-and-funding/embedding-2021-2027>.

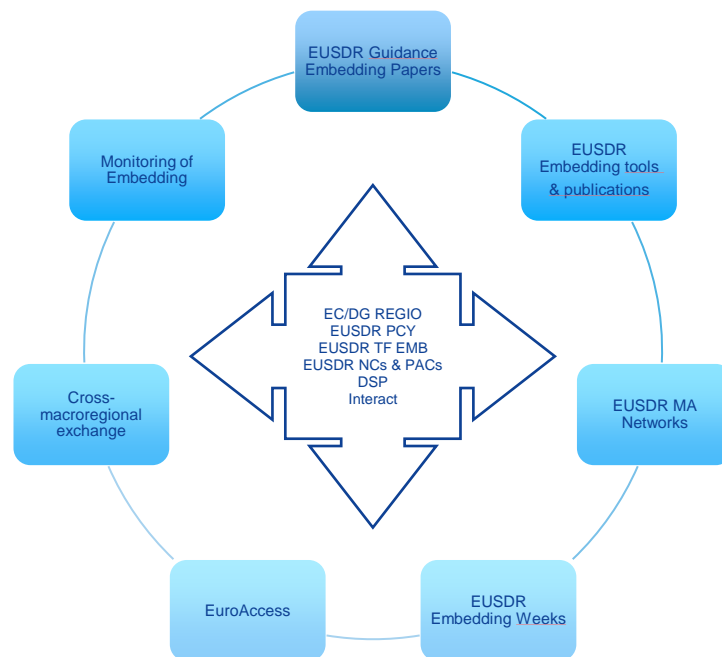


Figure 1: Embedding in the EUSDR

Gaining concrete insights

Moving from the EUSDR embedding planning phase to practical implementation requires a thorough understanding of the realities and needs of the involved actors. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to establish direct contact with stakeholders and get to learn about the needs, challenges and opportunities in the embedding process at first hand. This approach enables more precise assessments and tailored tools/activities, which support the embedding process and offer target groups relevant approaches and tailored solutions, such as:

- EUSDR managing/programming authorities networks (ESF, ERDF/CF, IPA/NDICI)
- EUSDR Embedding Weeks
- Cross-macro-regional exchange in Interact Working Groups and events.

Building trust and strengthening communication

The development of a process driven and sustainable embedding process takes time. It relies further on clear and transparent communication among (internal and external) stakeholders willing to cooperate closer. By that they dismantle barriers, build trust, and ensure that different perspectives are of great value for the whole process. This collaborative atmosphere boosts cooperation and improves the chances of gaining mutual support when implementing the embedding process, for instance via:

- EUSDR Guidance Embedding Papers
- EUSDR Task Force Embedding
- Monitoring of Embedding.

Embedding in Action

The added value of embedding is clear: it can reveal synergies between programmes and macro-regional strategies, better align MRS relevant EU policies and funding mechanisms, particularly with regard to the EU integration process. In this context, it is important to understand embedding as an active process that is implemented in concrete activities and actions and that go beyond 'purely financial' activities including governance, coordination or communication measures which were facilitated in:

- EUSDR Embedding Tools
- EUSDR Embedding publications
- EuroAccess call distributions.

3. Specific focus topic: Active embedding in the (Interreg) programme cycle – State of play and proposals

The Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management in Austria commissioned a study on *'Embedding macro-regional strategies: Reflections on the example of the Interreg CBC programmes'*, which was carried out in March - June 2023 by Rosinak & Partner ZT GmbH and the M&E Factory monitoring and evaluation GmbH².

The study aimed at preparing recommendations for a more active embedding of macro-regional strategies in Interreg CBC programmes (involving Austria) and at identifying possible opportunities for transferability to other (Interreg) programmes.

Based on the hypothesis, concluded by the study, that Interreg (transnational and) CBC programmes have the potential to support MRS and that synergies can be better exploited, active embedding steps from the EUSDR are analysed on the basis of the (Interreg) programme cycle in the following.

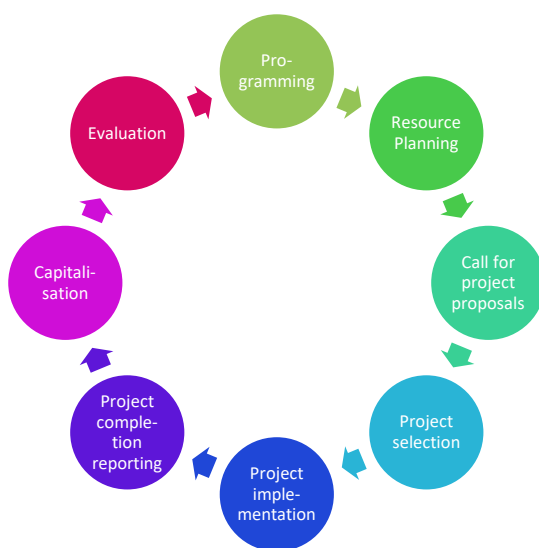


Figure 2: Programme cycle
designed by Rosinak & Partner, M&E Factory

Embedding the EUSDR in programmes can go through several phases along the programme cycle, from programming to project implementation, monitoring and evaluation. These phases involve different types of activities, actors and instruments and require coordinated efforts between the various (internal and external) stakeholders.

Based on the programme cycle phases outlined in the study in the figure on the left, the EUSDR aligned already existing activities and developed proposals for concrete active Embedding, based on the *recommendations outlined in the study*:

² Further readings: <https://danube-region.eu/expertise-embedding-of-mrs-austria/>.

Programming

While the objectives, priorities and activities of (Interreg transnational/CBC) programmes are defined, MRS can provide the overarching framework for programmes, with the specific programme objectives and activities being developed based on the needs and priorities of the participating regions.

To this end, the Danube Region Strategy has developed [EUSDR Embedding tools](#) for thematic prioritisation, established [EUSDR managing/programming authorities Networks](#) (ESF, ERDF/CF, IPA/NDICI) as joint cooperation platforms and organised [EUSDR Embedding Weeks](#) for stakeholder exchange.

The programme and the corresponding resources are designed in detail and partners are selected who will be involved in the implementation of the programme. The MRS can provide a platform for relevant partners and cooperation and coordination between the programmes.

Resource
Planning

In addition to the already institutionalised [EUSDR managing/programming authorities Networks](#), that meet informally 1-2 times a year and primarily serve to exchange experiences, a **concrete cooperation platform for explicit collaboration** between programmes and the EUSDR could be created.

Call for
project
proposals

Calls for proposals are typically carried out individually in programmes, although (one or more) programmes may create strategic calls for proposals on specific topics, which can be embedded in MRS (e.g. coordination/communication platform, interface programme types). By integrating MRS into the tendering for strategic projects, applicants could benefit from a cross-programme coordination.

The EUSDR works very closely with [EuroAccess](#) and distributes several times a year the Danube Region relevant calls to the Priority Areas. Above, a **joint Tendering Platform** coordination between the programmes and MRS could be established.

Project
selection

The selection criteria for the individual project selection of the programmes do generally not relate to MRS. Programmes could therefore consider in advance of a call to what extent the topic may also be relevant for MRS or whether links between topics and MRS can result in added value for the stakeholders concerned. The thematic actors of MRS/PACs could provide support to the call and selection.

In addition to the [EUSDR Action Plan](#) and the [EUSDR embedding tools](#) developed, such as the ready-to-use [shortlisted strategic topics](#), a co-evaluation was successfully carried out by PACs in the [Interreg DRP SMF Call 2024](#).

Project
implemen-
tation

Project implementation takes place through different project work packages. If the cooperation of a project with MRS has an added value for the Region, MRS can play a supporting role in individual work packages, such as in communication or the involvement of political stakeholders. Further, project results could be made available to other potentially interested stakeholders outside the Interreg (CBC) region. Accordingly, the MRS can be available as a platform for the project report.

In this respect, the EUSDR operates a [website](#) and social media channels on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#), [X](#), [Bluesky](#) and [YouTube](#), where activities can be shared to increase visibility and outreach. Mutual exchange between projects and Priority Areas is facilitated, for example via [Steering Group](#) and project meetings.



The Interreg DRP further organised a [Lead Partner Seminar](#) in April 2024 to bring projects and PACs together that could be institutionalised on an annual basis. For the utilisation of the project results, the EUSDR offers possible participation in [EUSDR/PA networks](#) (knowledge networks), meetings and events, according to the [priorities of the Strategy](#).

As programmes are designed sustainable to ensure that benefits of cross-border cooperation are maintained after the projects end, MRS can help to identify long-term funding sources, build local capacity and ensure the integration of programme activities into broader regional development strategies. MRS as policy communication and stakeholder platform offer a much wider reach of potential future beneficiaries of project results. In contrast, ideas that arise in MRS may be tested as pilot projects or serve as project generators for future follow-up projects.



The capitalisation of project results is monitored in the EUSDR with the biennial reporting of PACs and NCs and assessed in the [EUSDR Implementation Reports](#). Furthermore, a **coordinated capitalisation strategy and platform** of programmes and the EUSDR could achieve greater added value for stakeholders in the Region.

In the case of strategic calls for proposals and/or projects, an overarching analysis of the effectiveness – e.g., by MRS or INTERACT - should be considered. The analysis may be incorporated into the question of the EU added value of the programme interventions.



The EUSDR commissions [Policy/Impact and Process/Implementations evaluations](#) every three years, including programme aspects. In addition to that, a **coordination of evaluation platform for explicit collaboration** of programmes and MRS could be considered.

4. Conclusions for active embedding

The mentioned study on ‘Embedding macro-regional strategies: Reflections on the example of the Interreg CBC programmes’, conducted by Rosinak & Partner ZT GmbH and the M&E Factory monitoring and evaluation GmbH in 2023, outlines further recommendations for active embedding.

Scaling-up those recommendations, the following examples show various ways in which the embedding of the EUSDR concerns/priorities in other programmes was already successful and where further initiatives may be envisaged. As far as possible, the EUSDR aligned already existing activities and developed proposals for concrete active embedding assigned to the various areas of the (Interreg transnational/CBC) programme cycle analysed in the previous chapter.

Programming	Calls	Implementation, Information & Communication	Capitalisation	Evaluation	Capacity Building
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<p>Interact tool on cooperation actions aims at unlocking joint activities; in the EUSDR Embedding tools, managing/programming authorities Networks (ESF, ERDF/CF, IPA/NDICI) and yearly Embedding Weeks were established.</p>	<p>EUSDR (PA 8)/EUSBSR/EUSALP synchronised call and further options discussed in detail in the UA EUSDR PCY Embedding Paper and in the yearly EUSDR MA Network meetings; EuroAccess calls dissemination.</p>	<p>EUSDR website and social media channels; yearly EUSDR Embedding Weeks; mutual participation in PA events/(SG) meetings/project events, EUSDR/PA networks; participation in EUSDR Annual Fora; Interreg DRP Lead Partner Seminar 2024.</p>	<p>Participation EUSDR/PA networks; biennial reporting of PACs and NCs and assessed in the EUSDR Implementation Reports.</p>	<p>EUSDR Policy/Impact and Process/Implementations evaluations every three years; biennial EUSDR Implementation Reports.</p>	<p>EUSDR Embedding tools; yearly EUSDR Embedding Weeks; participation in Interact cross-MRS Working Group 'Embedding'.</p>
✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
<p>The programming process will be further analysed with the Interact tool in the monitoring of the EUSDR Embedding process (2025).</p>	<p>No further examples of coordinated/ synchronised calls for projects financed via EU/national/regional funded programmes; no joint Tendering Platform coordination between programmes and EUSDR.</p>	<p>No institutionalised joint communication measures of programmes and EUSDR.</p>	<p>No coordinated capitalisation strategy and capitalisation platform of programmes and EUSDR.</p>	<p>The Embedding the EUSDR into EU programmes will be further analysed in the monitoring of the EUSDR Embedding process (2025); no coordination of an evaluation platform for explicit collaboration of programmes and EUSDR.</p>	<p>Further support of Interact a follow-up of EUSDR Embedding Weeks and the revival of EUSDR Financing Dialogues may be envisaged.</p>

5. Proposed way forward in the work on Embedding during the 2nd half of 2024:

During the final phase of the Austrian EUSDR Presidency, a specific focus at overall Strategy level will be dedicated to embedding by following activities:

Envisaged activities under the Austrian EUSDR Presidency

	Envisaged activity	Estimated calendar*
1	Guidance Paper for Embedding the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) into EU Programmes of the Austrian EUSDR Presidency in cooperation with the DSP.	mid-August 2024
2	<p>Reflection at the EUSDR PAC meeting and seminar (Neusiedl am See, Austria); focussing on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual updating on efforts and good practice aiming for embedding in the implementation phase of relevant programmes – incl. a focus on Interreg CBC programmes; • Stock-taking of achievements, lessons-learnt, perspectives so far (upper table) and discussing possible future activities (lower table), starting to put those in the context of the upcoming debate about future perspectives post-2027 – incl. a focus on the accession perspective; • Preparing inputs and guiding questions for the next networking meeting with all EUSDR managing/programming authorities. 	11-12 September 2024
3	<p>Reflection at a EUSDR managing/programming authorities network meeting (online/half day);</p> <p>Building on the work so far and on the results of the exchange with PACs on 11-12 September 2024.</p> <p>Feeding in/discussing selected topics raised in the debate about ‘Future Perspective for cooperation in the Danube region post-2027’.</p>	October/November2024

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|----------|---|---------------------|
| 4 | Presentation in the Interact cross-macroregional Embedding Working Group (online) | October 2024 (tbc) |
| 5 | Concluding at the NC-PAC meeting | 10-11 December 2024 |
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* Preliminary proposal; changes and adjustments are possible.

The Guidance document is considered a rolling document. Feedback and Inputs on the Guidance paper are welcomed.