

Austrian EUSDR Presidency Initiative: Key Messages and Processes on Future Perspectives for Macro-Regional Cooperation in the Danube Region post-2027

## Think Piece on the need to step up cooperation for mastering future challenges in the Danube Region

### Policy pointers for the post-2027 debate

by Spatial Foresight, Kai Böhme, Franziska Sielker, Maria Toptsidou





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## **Introduction**

The **year 2024** marks the **start of debates on EU policies post-2027**. Thus, it provides a window of opportunity for agenda setting activities. In this light, the Austrian EUSDR Presidency has provided formats to support debates in the Danube Region to identify key messages in this respect.

The **Austrian EUSDR Presidency** asked Spatial Foresight, Kai Böhme and Franziska Sielker, supported by Maria Toptsidou, to reflect on changing framework conditions and their implications for cooperation needs in the Danube Region. The reflections evolved in interactive processes including discussions with key players of the EUSDR and a range of EU policies (see Annex 2) and presentations at various events – in particular at the **Annual EUSDR Forum on 20/21 June 2024 in Vienna**.

This *Think Piece* document summarises the discussions and experts' findings about **changing opportunities and framework conditions for macro-regional cooperation in the Danube Region in transformative times**. It is by no means a full overview of everything, but a discussion paper highlighting selected developments and debates. It contains both ideas, which are widely shared in the community as well as some which might be more controversial and generate discussion.

The **main message of the Think Piece** is that the **Danube Region** faces a range of transformation processes, which either can be let to come, or tried to be utilised to the advantage of the region. Proactively addressing **transformative challenges cannot be done alone. It requires cooperation and coordination**. Considering the urgency and dimension of the challenges, it requires stepping up current cooperation efforts and mechanisms.

This Think Piece wants to **stimulate further debate among relevant key players**. Section 1 introduces a range of demands for cooperation in a transforming Danube Region. What that means for the need to boost various forms of cooperation is outlined in section 2. Sections 3 and 4 provide policy pointers for different stakeholder groups and policy communities on what they could do to strengthen cooperation and coordination which contributes to shaping transformation processes: Section 3 addresses the wider stakeholder cooperation community on the Danube Region, including the EUSDR family. Section 4 outlines how the wider EU policy framework needs further fostering and new perspectives in respect to cooperation, especially towards Cohesion Policy 2028+, including addressing links between macro-regional strategies, and between the EUSDR and Interreg. Section 5 calls for action now.

***Disclaimer:** A short Think Piece has to be selective. To provoke discussion and out of the box thinking, this paper highlights a limited variation of aspects. It highlights – sometimes provocative – aspects to stimulate debate and thinking beyond the usual lines of thought. It further aims to link MRS debates with the broader contemporary developments at the European level. In that sense, it is not necessarily well balanced and does not try to accommodate all perspectives and possible futures.*

*In complement to this Think Piece, the Vienna Institute for International Economic Research (wiiw) and Rosinak & Partner ZT were commissioned to elaborate a **fact-based Study on Regional and Territorial Trends in the Danube Region**.*



## Key messages for the future of Danube cooperation

**The Danube Region plays a crucial role in addressing Europe's grand challenges.** Understanding this in light of the region's specificities will provide new purposes for cooperation. The Danube Region with its diversity will be met by major transformations in specific ways that may challenge its inner cohesion, competitiveness and its position in Europe and the world in new ways.

**Cooperation has proven to be an effective policy approach in times of transformation.** A transformative journey is not merely an option; it is a necessity for ensuring a resilient, inclusive, and prosperous future. The increasing investment needs for transformation processes and a proliferation of policy objectives are contrasted by contracting public finance both in the countries and at EU level. Addressing these changing framework conditions and shaping transformative changes requires cooperation. Cooperation tools under Cohesion Policy and macro-regional strategies allow for a joint vision and agenda development to best tackle these changes across the Danube Region.

**Framework conditions for cooperation are important at all levels, with EU frameworks being crucial** – to be considered more beyond Cohesion Policy, Interreg and macro-regional strategies. Cooperation efforts and support remain an important pillar of transformation policies and need to extend beyond Cohesion Policy. The EUSDR with its flexible governance and policy area focus has the potential to become an enabler for transformative policies that serve all regions in the Danube countries.

**Cooperation encompasses many types of activities which can be applied in tailor-made ways.** The EUSDR should dare being bolder in its ambitions and claims. This includes further exploiting the opportunities the EUSDR offers to become a testbed for new approaches in synergy with other cooperation tools.

**Cooperation aims far beyond project logic.** It is about preparing processes and long-term visions, bringing new relevant stakeholders onboard, and allowing to tap into all relevant policies – well established and emerging ones. Cooperations should strengthen its policy thinking beyond Cohesion Policy and project-based funding. In the Danube Region, the EUSDR governance can help exploit its potential to link activities across policies and funding instruments for more integrated approaches across sectors.

**Mission-oriented approaches gain importance in cooperation** – working cross-sectoral and initiating multi-level bundles of activities and strategic projects is key. In line with a mission-orientation, the EUSDR governance should further push its focus beyond individual projects towards long-term policy processes. This includes increased efforts on connecting various projects to largescale transformative actions.

**The gradual integration approach to EU enlargement offers multi-fold opportunities for enhancing cooperation with non-EU member countries and regions** – the EUSDR has the potential to function as a laboratory in this respect. Future Cohesion Policy and Accession Agendas need to facilitate opportunities for the Danube countries to strengthen their coordination and collaboration efforts across funding schemes and policy frameworks. Cooperation has a unique potential to develop collaboration on equal footing.

**The EUSDR serves as valuable platform of sustaining cooperation with Ukraine and all regions in the Danube area hampered by the consequences of the war in Ukraine.** The Danube Region is particularly impacted by the Russian war on Ukraine, and geopolitical interests in the region. Cooperation is key for the Danube Region to strengthen its inner cohesion, support defence industries and prepare reconstruction.

**The EUSDR provides formats and tools to give more visibility to the achievements and potentials of cooperation in the Danube Region.** The EUSDR governance should help to further communicate the territorial implications of the contemporary dynamics and developments for the regions.

**The EUSDR provides a sustainable governance system for Danube cooperation.** The fact that the EUSDR is a political strategy with an existing governance system allows it to be an important intermediary and to translate European challenges and new political agendas to the ongoing political priorities of the EUSDR.

**Joining forces for cooperation now!** The months towards spring of 2025 offer a window of opportunity to create input to the negotiations of EU agendas and policies. From 2025 the more formal process on shaping the EU budget 2028+ and the strategic orientation of Cohesion Policy and other EU policies will start, with narratives being developed now.



## **1 Cooperation opportunities and needs in a transforming region**

Over the next decades, Europe will face several major transformations. Various of the expected transformations are likely to affect or even change the opportunities and framework conditions for cooperation.

Transformations will meet the diverse Danube Region in specific ways. Different regions within the Danube Region will face different adversities resulting from these changing framework conditions, demanding policy coordination across the region.

### **Five major transformations coming to the fore**

**Transformative economies and industries.** In many regards, Europe is losing its global competitive edge and risks to do so even more in light of technological and economic transitions which may shape the next decades. This puts the focus on the need to increase global competitiveness and economic and industrial transformations that might help on the way. It also includes the necessity to address the changing role of labour and employment and to close the skills gap. Already today many European policy documents address the digital and green twin transition, and some even add the demographic transition to it. Expect this to become stronger. Transformations of industries may also concern responses to geopolitical conflicts and the future reconstruction of Ukraine.

**Transformative climate change adaptation and mitigation.** Climate change effects become increasingly notable all over Europe. This requires more efforts to adapt to climate change and still also mitigate it, where possible. In many regards, a multitude of small-scale local actions may no longer be sufficient. More systemic – large scale interventions – might be needed. Firstly, this will require decision-making in which costs and benefits are separated by long time-lags and in parts even by spatial-lags. Secondly, it is about intrinsically complex coupled social–ecological systems. Thirdly, it is about producing global collective goods that go beyond the scope of unilateral ‘single-best efforts’ of any player.

**Transformative societal values.** The European society is changing. This involves large debates about different generations and societal groups – not at least in terms of integration of vulnerable groups, such as the Roma – and their values or expectations to life. It is also about an aging population and its implications for the functioning of our societies, economies and welfare systems, but also changing and diverging values – e.g. increasing populism and Euroscepticism. In parts all this touches on the foundation of our value bases incl. our understating of democracies, rule of law etc. The need to strengthen a pan-European identity and improve the access of citizens to policy making will emerge more strongly in future. The Letta Report also calls for an active involvement of citizens.

**Transformative quality of government and governance.** Effective and efficient institutions and governance arrangements, enhancing the participation of people at local and regional levels are essential. They strengthen democracy, trust in public institutions, effective policy making, economic growth and the returns of public investments. High quality governance helps translate regional investments and support into economic growth. Especially in times of financial constraints the importance of good government and governance and its ability to orchestrate and mobilise collective action receives more attention. Trust in governments is equally important in times of increased



geopolitical armed conflicts. High quality governments will be the key to any of the transformations addressed above.

**Transformative EU 27+.** The EU itself is facing a transformation process not at least driven by the prospects of future enlargements. At present, a dynamic re-evaluation is underway, encompassing geographical considerations, institutional reforms, enhanced competencies, and strategic funding allocations. This reassessment is prompted by a critical juncture marked by geopolitical shifts, transnational crises, and internal intricacies. At the forefront of this recalibration is the imperative for EU enlargement, which has taken on renewed significance in the face of an increasingly challenging international context and a war at Europe's borders.

These transformations accelerate the demand for new policy responses and priorities at all levels. As a response to these ongoing economical, societal, environmental and (geo-)political transformations, the EU has over the last decade shifted its priorities, with new policy agendas, regulations and funding instruments emerging. Annex 1 provides a non-exhaustive illustration of recent EU policy initiatives and legal frameworks aiming to prepare for a better future. To only name a few, the European Green Deal, the Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry (LULUCF) Regulation, the Critical Raw Materials Act or the New Industrial Policy Agenda are all responses to climate change, digitalisation and a changing economy. Other examples are the development of new funding tools. In the meantime, the new Commission has started to outline its strategic orientations. While these numerous initiatives can help Europe to prepare for the future as a whole, different parts of Europe will face different challenges.

### **Danube context matters! Transformations meet the Danube Region in specific ways**

The five transformations will meet a Danube Region characterised by an enormous territorial, economic and social diversity:

- The region involves countries at different stages of EU integration, from member states of the first hour to countries aspiring to become part of the EU.
- The Danube Region encompasses metropolitan areas, small and medium sized towns, rural areas and peripheral places, with different regional and national growth tendencies, from shrinking to fast-paced growth.
- The Danube Region comprises thriving and innovative places, as well as places lagging or falling behind. There are places experiencing population growth and places facing aging and population decline. Other regions in the Danube area continue to experience brain drain and significant skills gaps.
- There are places with internationally important environmental assets and places facing loss of biodiversity and pollution of the environment.
- Above all, the places in the region are home to people with very diverse expectations, visions and hopes, which need to be considered. To avoid the risk of major backlashes it is important to embark on transformations in cooperation with people and institutions.
- The Danube Region is key to successful enlargement efforts, while at the same time reorienting its efforts in light of the diverse impacts on different regions. Forthcoming enlargements must be supported by people and enterprises in respective border regions and the Danube Region as a whole including its cooperation legacy and potential. One example is the EUSDR's potential to serve as a strategic enabler for a successful Western Balkan Initiative.



Although there is no certainty about what exactly will change and what implications future changes might bring, it is clear that each transformation will affect all places in the region differently. Transformations may reinforce each other in their implications for local and regional development potential and challenges in the Danube Region. By nature, those potential and challenges can only be addressed in a cooperative way.

### **Several strategic cross-sectoral themes may gain importance for the Danube Region**

The following policy pointers may serve as starting points for discussions about changing cooperation opportunities and needs in the Danube Region:

- **The region needs to actively engage with forthcoming EU accessions at local and regional level.** The envisaged gradual accession processes of future EU member states offer possibilities for the Danube Region. Especially cross-border regions of current EU and non-EU countries have the potential to become frontrunners for European integration of the at local and regional level.
- **Investments in green energy as well as in transport infrastructure and systems become a new lifeline.** As the role of the Danube as transport route risks to decline, alternative sustainable transnational transport routes need to receive more attention. Also, transnational investments in renewable energy infrastructure (networks and production) are important, especially in non-EU member states.
- **Many parts of the Danube Region may face a double risk of falling behind in the expected economic and technological transitions.** The EU is not among the global leaders when it comes to transformative economic and technological changes. Within the EU, the Danube Region is not among the leaders and risks to fall further behind – especially lagging areas in the Danube Region may experience a ‘double lagging behind challenge’. Strengthening transnational cooperations, clusters and supply chains may help to boost the international competitiveness of the region.
- **Prioritising future industries and especially SMEs and spatially discontinuous clusters may reduce the risk of being left behind.** The Danube Region has no strong basis in future industries and key industries where the EU wants to strengthen its autonomy. However, many parts of the region have a strong SME basis. It will be essential to help these SMEs to embark on the forthcoming transformations and strengthen networks and clusters across national borders.
- **Developing future transport-corridors is key to ensuring supply chain accesses in the region.** The challenging geopolitical conditions – especially, the risk for long-term armed conflicts alongside supply routes – require a rethinking of supply chain security through transport corridors in the Danube Region. With the challenges of long-term navigation alongside the Danube, the identification of key investments is needed.
- **The role of the Danube river will change from a transport route to an eco-system.** Climate change, increasing water shortages and droughts are expected to challenge the navigability of the Danube. At the same time, its large eco-system will receive more attention, that includes its function for water retention, sponge function in case of floods, biodiversity etc.
- **Impacts of demographic change are expected to accelerate and will require rethinking.** Most transformations and especially the demographic outlooks point at increasing concentration to urban areas and the risk of declining and aging rural areas. This poses severe development challenges in these areas. It may also be a potential for strengthening eco-system services if it is possible to find viable solutions. The Danube Region will have to decide at which side of the coin it wants to look.
- **The freedom to both stay and move will require innovative transnational approaches** to avoid increasing disparities between countries. Finding transnational solutions for combating brain-drain, digital nomads, etc. will be essential for the livelihood of many parts of the Danube Region. The



Danube Region could become a testbed for innovative transitional solutions (and legal arrangements) serving the freedom to both stay and move in the EU.

- **Experiment with large scale eco-system services as tradable to lead the way.** The Danube Region has very rich and diverse eco-system services. It is a good testbed for experimenting with large scale approach on how to monetarise eco-system services and develop solutions to make them tradable even across regional and national borders.
- **A diversification in funding mechanisms requires more agility.** The last decades have shown a diversification of funds at EU level, and more fundamental changes are to be expected. For the Danube Region to make use of the full potential of available means and make use of the diversification of funding embedding processes, it needs agile governance.
- **A diversification of EU policy agendas requires rethinking of the Policy Areas' contribution to these broader policy agendas.** The last decades have shown an emergence of new policy priorities at the EU level. For the EUSDR stakeholders this requires to revisit their established modes of working and ensure close cooperation with the different policy arenas at national and EU level.
- **Strengthening the institutional capacities and preparations for enlargement.** Increased institutional capacities are an important driver for ensuring returns on public investments and cooperation initiatives. This concerns all levels of government as well as transnational cooperation and should accompany the envisaged gradual integration and accession processes, taking into account the Western Balkan Growth Agenda and Reform Plan, IPA III, the Ukraine Facility and the Ukraine Plan as well as the forthcoming Moldova Growth Plan and the Reform and Growth Facility for the Republic of Moldova.

## ***2 Cooperation is a must to shape the future***

To successfully handle the transformative changes ahead, cooperation across national borders, levels of governance and across policy domains is essential. Cooperations can act as testbeds for skills development, a point from which bigger developments and projects can emerge. Cooperation is needed to develop enabling frameworks and transformative actions, to build institutional capacities and learn – both together and from each other. Cooperation allows regions within the Danube Region to identify their unique opportunities. And, cooperation must result in strategic action. This means cooperation is not an end in itself, but a means to help regions to flourish. Therefore, cooperation means hard work and does not evolve through cooperation programmes only. It requires commitment, shared ambitions, knowledge, institutional capacities, confidence and mutual understanding.

Policy instruments which support cooperation and coordination are important at all levels. However, cooperation instruments at EU level are crucial, especially Interreg, and embedding cooperation initiatives. Macro-regional strategies provide an important instrument for policy coordination within and across priority areas. Cooperation efforts in the EU are the sum of activities across a wide range of instruments and initiatives in member states and beyond.

**Cooperation has to be understood beyond a single project and a single programme logic**, and should increasingly be built around 'cross-sectoral missions'. This is particularly important as for example new priorities such as increased competitiveness can only be reached if education, business investments and among others, energy provision provide the right framework conditions.





For the Danube Region to be transformative and use the transformations as a motor for actively shaping a positive future, it requires to think the future development of the region in terms of a 'mission'. Such a mission requires a wide range of players and resources to come together – going far beyond what the EUSDR manages to mobilise today. Furthermore, it requires that the objectives of the mission are accepted by the players as their own objectives – which call on their own intrinsic motivations – rather than objectives of a faraway strategy. Furthermore, it calls on identifying and strengthen synergies between policies – both between Cohesion Policy and other EU policies, and between EU and national policies. In an environment of growing challenges and declining public funding, potential synergies have to be fully exploited. This goes far beyond embedding cooperation.

Cooperation is multi-dimensional by nature. Accordingly, there is no one-size-fits all approach to cooperation. There is a necessity for tailor-made solutions. This requires framework conditions which allow support to different types of cooperation, a task where the EUSDR governance can support the mission development alongside the grand new challenges and with the support of Policy Area Coordinators and National Coordinator in bridging to their national contexts.

### **More focus on specific types of cooperation – becoming more effective at 'bridging points'**

Transformative cooperation requires a delicate balance or bridging between cooperation approaches which sometimes may seem contradicting to one another. Consolidating each of the below bridging points will be one of the essential challenges for macro-regional cooperation:

- **Bridging large scale initiatives and bottom-up approaches.** While territorial cooperation traditionally is bottom-up driven and emphasises the need to involve citizens and local stakeholders, transformative cooperation often calls for more coordinated initiatives to ensure a clear direction which can be transformative (e.g. when it comes to the identification of future sectors, or legal arrangements regulating the freedom to move and to stay).
- **Bridging local actions and multi-level governance.** Local actions and their connections across transnational territories is a key characteristic and strength of macro-regional cooperation. In many cases this involves players from different levels of governance. To be transformative, cooperation requires a stronger linking of initiatives across different governmental levels.
- **Bridging hard action and soft cooperation.** Territorial cooperation is often characterised by networking, partnerships, informal, flexible collaborations between regional or national players that focus on sharing knowledge, best practices, and common goals rather than binding, formal agreements. At the same time, to unfold its transformative potential cooperation needs a stronger focus on the development of concrete hard investments or formal agreements.
- **Bridging large scale change and declining financial resources.** Moving towards more transformative actions requires resources – both in terms of political commitment and money. This is particularly challenging in times of declining public financing.
- **Bridging 'here & now' with 'over there & in future'.** Territorial cooperation and transformative actions are about what is done 'here' and 'now'. The actual benefits of transformative actions often come with a considerably time-lag and not necessarily at the place of action or investment. That today's actions and costs are linked to benefits in a long-term future – which even might occur elsewhere – poses a challenge to project-based financing and reporting of cooperation actions.

Danube Region players have undertaken efforts to square these circles. The question is whether it is possible to step-up these efforts in a systemic way. Could the EUSDR bring the various aspects together e.g. in the elaboration of roadmaps – involving a wide range of players and ensuring their commitment



to also implement them at their respective levels later? A strong, committed and well-coordinated cooperation among key players may be the key to unlock answers.

### **Entering a new phase of Danube cooperation – also to contribute to EU enlargement processes**

Macro-regional strategies started as experimental flexible governance tools. To support an active shaping of transformation and enlargement processes, the EUSDR should make more use of its flexible character and support the development of new processes, specifically in view of the changing policy landscape.

A few discussion points on changing cooperation needs also concerning cooperation between EU member states and accession countries – and going beyond single policy areas – in the Danube Region are the following:

#### **Scaling up cooperation across policy areas to shape transformations in the Danube Region.**

Reaching climate or competitiveness goals means that Europe needs to work together on grander scale. Already today there is a mass of initiatives and projects addressing the digital, green and demographic transitions. Can territorial cooperation step this up and bring together the piecemeal of actions to systemic interventions which develop enough power to become transformative and put the Danube Region on the map? This could e.g. be the case in following fields:

- Cooperation on boosting future industries based on SMEs and international networks: Can transnational cooperation identify critical transformative sectors in which to boost SMEs by strengthening international networks and decentralised solutions in the Danube Region, e.g. linked to micro- or additive manufacturing?
- Cooperation on boosting the transition to renewable energy via transnational efforts and cross-border energy communities: Can transnational cooperation help to scale this up, e.g. through the support of (cross-border) energy communities, as well as through transnational large scale energy infrastructure or projects?

**Cooperation on actions with asymmetric spatial impacts.** How to deal with transformative cooperation, which require considerable actions and investments in one place, but which generate benefits for other places? Can transnational cooperation develop, test and experiment innovative transnational governance solutions supporting and financing such important investments with asymmetric spatial impacts? This could e.g. be the case in following fields:

- Cooperation on governance and financing arrangements for transnational ecosystem services: Can transnational cooperation help to develop innovative governance arrangements which allow all those benefitting from the ecosystem service to contribute to its development, maintenance and financing, even if ecosystem services are generated in another country?
- Cooperation on governance arrangements regulating the freedom to move and stay: Focusing on specific topics such as e.g. brain drain and how to allow people to stay in one country but work in another country, or digital nomads working for some months in another country than their country of residence, quickly meet issues related to taxation and social security contributions. Is it possible to develop and test innovative transnational solutions for boosting the freedom to move (e.g. digital nomads), and to stay (e.g. preventing brain drain)?

#### **Cooperation on strengthening the institutional capacities and preparations for enlargement.**

Increased institutional capacities are an important driver for ensuring returns on public investments and



cooperation initiatives. Efforts are ongoing to prepare candidate countries for regional policy. This concerns all levels of government as well as transnational cooperation. Can transnational cooperation further strengthen its efforts in the field? This could e.g. be the case in following fields:

- Cooperation on regional preparedness for enlargement: Can transnational cooperation support local and regional authorities in accession countries and member states preparing for this process and learning from past accessions?
- Cooperation on boosting institutional capacity and citizen involvement: European values and citizen involvement need to be strengthened throughout the Danube Region, taking into account different traditions and administrative systems. Would it be possible to bring together single initiatives in a transnational framework or roadmap for administrative capacity building?

The above are just ideas to stimulate debate about how to further transnational cooperation and strengthen its role as enable for the Danube Region to shape forthcoming transformations. The nature of these cooperation ideas also call for a Danube Region framework and facilitation to ensure that cooperation can move beyond piecemeal initiatives and collect strength to support unavoidable transformations.

**To shape transformations and become future-wise**, cooperation initiatives in the Danube Region – including the work in the EUSDR – need to

- overcome its concentration on Cohesion Policy and become a platform for integration of a broad range for policy fields and funding instruments;
- better connect the dots of all (small) interventions to energise large scale transformative efforts;
- become at testbed for transnational legal and governance arrangements e.g. linked to macro-regional distance working or ecosystem services;
- step-up its efforts to strengthen institutional capacities in the Danube Region;
- support a broader understanding of the development challenges for its subregions;
- push for the most relevant agendas to ensure a funding landscape that suits the requirements of all regions in the Danube area;
- become a tool for preparing enlargement on the ground, both in existing member states and candidate countries.

### ***3 Policy pointers – addressing the EUSDR-family***

Cooperation is already a strong feature in the Danube Region. Still, more is needed at all levels. This means also more active engagement of many players – beyond the immediate governance structure of the EUSDR – to raise awareness and sensitise key players especially at national level. To tackle transformative pathways requires a growing EUSDR family.

Cooperation on the aspects and policy challenges highlighted in the previous chapters will shape the response capacity of the Danube Region to future changes and transitions. This goes beyond what individual players in the EUSDR governance system, Cohesion Policy and Interreg programmes and projects can do. It calls for a wider policy debate linking national policies and debates and the Danube Region perspective.



#### **Takeaways / Policy pointers for Danube Region cooperation:**

- Cooperation in the Danube Region should engage players in mission-oriented roadmap processes, which may involve initiatives with long time-lags and spatial-lags between costs and benefits.
- Cooperation in the Danube Region should strengthen its policy thinking beyond Cohesion Policy.
- Cooperation in the Danube Region needs to convince other EU policies to become more place-aware and make them active partners supporting selected EUSDR missions.
- Cooperation in the Danube Region should explore alternatives to project-based funding, which would allow for more long-term financing of transformative processes.
- Cooperation in the Danube Region needs to scope – on a regular base – topics which gain and/or lose importance.
- Cooperation in the Danube Region needs to work on cross-sectoral multilevel governance topics which gain importance towards post-2027. This includes climate change adaptation related to droughts and freshwater retention and access, transnational solutions for ecosystem services as tradable, border areas preparing for the next rounds of EU enlargement, SMEs as players in the economic, digital and green transitions for smaller places, potential of micro- and additive manufacturing, digital futures for e-government, transnational solutions to brain drain and skills development, changing global transport routes and role of ports in the Danube Region, thinking the Danube beyond navigability, etc.

### **3.1 EUSDR dialogue with emerging EU policy fields**

The number of new policy priorities that surfaced at the EU level require a dialogue within the EUSDR about which of these transformations and priorities the EUSDR sees as most challenging to the regions in the Danube area. The EUSDR core governance can provide an understanding of the activities within the EUSDR countries, and identify the most urgent needs for a joint mission-development. Linking national priorities will be key for a broader political support. The EUSDR core governance can act as an intermediary here.

The question is whether it is possible to step-up these efforts in a systemic way. Could the EUSDR bring the various aspects together e.g. in the elaboration of transnational transformative roadmaps – involving a wide range of players and ensuring their commitment to also implement them at their respective levels later? A strong, committed and well-coordinated cooperation among the key players – with the Danube Strategy Point as an important intermediary – may be the key to unlock answers.

#### **Specific proposals: Transnational Transformative Roadmaps**

- Develop thematic transformative roadmaps for the Danube Region involving all relevant policies and financing structures and establish the EUSDR as policy coordination platform, based on existing EUSDR efforts and governance structures.
- There are different ways how to identify the themes for the roadmaps, e.g. starting from the EUSDR action plan, the five fields of transformation identified in this think piece or the priorities of the EU Commission 2024-2029. These roadmaps should also take further the results of the Open Space sessions at the EUSDR Forum in Vienna in 2024.
- The roadmaps should help to move beyond piecemeal approaches, strengthening the engagement of a wide range of policy players within the Danube Region. They should also offer a reference framework for sector policies and financing instruments showcasing how and why they embed the Danube Region perspective in their work.



## 3.2 Changing funding potential for the EUSDR cooperation

The new challenges and political priorities will have concrete impacts for funding opportunities and future projects within the EUSDR. Within the priority areas, scoping potentials and opportunities for new cooperation in line with the transformations in the region can help set up new activities jointly with 'traditional' EUSDR sectors.

### Specific proposals: Harnessing new funding opportunities

- Follow the development of the post-2027 funding period closely, as well as the mid-term review for the current Cohesion Policy period and encourage Priority Areas to foster projects in line with new priorities. One such example is the potential shift in usability of Cohesion Policy funds. In case Cohesion Policy will see less programmes (e.g. just one programme per member state), which are guided by national plans agreed with the Commission and applying performance-based and 'cash for reform' principles, it needs to be ensured that EUSDR and macro-regional cooperation in the Danube Region is well anchored in all programmes and national plans in the region.
- In case the EU is setting up a major fund for competitiveness – next to Cohesion Policy – it needs to be ensured that the contribution of the EUSDR and macro-regional cooperation in the Danube Region is recognised in the fund's regulations and delivery mechanisms.
- Beyond that, the EUSDR needs to keep an overview of the funding opportunities and limitations across funding tools and identify complementarity with activities within priority areas. One such example is the emerging cooperation mechanism of Regional Innovation Valleys. EUSDR stakeholders can actively support the regions engaging in these activities and promote for cross-fertilisation with other fundings, such as ERASMUS+.
- Actively engage with the emerging policy landscape, in particular newly emerging regulations and directives and support EUSDR stakeholders to early identify the potential challenges emerging for EUSDR countries and regions.
- Under the competitiveness agenda, cities will be eligible for new funding mechanisms. The Danube Strategy Point as an intermediary can help facilitate cooperation across Danubian urban agglomerations making use of existing events such as the Annual Forum for dedicated networking activities.

## 3.3 EUSDR contribution to enlargement processes

For the forthcoming EU enlargements, gradual integration processes are envisaged, phasing the accession of a country. Managing the stepwise accession processes well and on a level playing field is key for a seamless integration. The EUSDR can contribute with concrete initiatives to support gradual integration, including new joint projects, embedding and linkages to other key initiatives, such as different strategies and funding tools for the Western Balkan countries.

### Specific proposals: Supporting gradual integration

- Integration needs to happen on the ground involving citizens, civil society, enterprises as well as local and regional authorities, especially in cross-border regions of EU and non-EU countries. The EUSDR can reinforce its efforts to engage people on the ground in the preparation of accession, showcasing what is in it for them – on both sides of the borders – and how they can contribute. To start with, the EUSDR webpage can serve as a summary or 'toolbox' for collaboration initiatives.
- Integration is not only about adopting the *acquis*. It is also about understanding what potential accession countries bring to finding integrated solutions and developing transnational responses to pressing issues. The above mentioned 'transnational transformative roadmaps' can be a tool to help



identify areas of potential collaborations across rural regions and cities. In case the EUSDR is going to develop such 'transnational transformative roadmaps' it should ensure that they are fed into enlargement discussions.

- A good dialogue with DG REFORM (or its successor) and member states can help to initiate projects across EUSDR and enlargement countries that help the administration of projects and prepare for important reforms. These projects can at the same time contribute to the above-mentioned roadmaps.
- The EUSDRs should continue to bridge hard action and soft cooperation, by including enlargement countries through soft cooperation means in projects where cooperation through funding is not yet possible.

### **3.4 EUSDR complementarities with other cooperation initiatives**

Cooperation is essential for integrated and future-wise development. In the Danube Region, there are various cooperation initiatives besides the EUSDR. This includes Interreg programmes and territorial cooperations in the context of embedding cooperation in national and regional ERDF and ESF+ programmes. To many of these the EUSDR governance has developed good contacts and working relations. Given the need to step up cooperation, the efforts to join forces of (all) cooperation initiative should be further intensified. It should also include possible new initiatives e.g. linked to the EU competitiveness agenda following the emphasis Mario Draghi puts in his report on the need to increase territorial cooperation in specific sectors. Joining forces needs to focus on advocating the importance of territorial cooperation for managing forthcoming transformations and to spell out the complementarities between different cooperation initiatives.

#### **Specific Proposals: Joining forces and progressing on complementarity**

- Territorial cooperation needs to strengthen its efforts to move from worthy piecemeal initiatives funded through individual projects to transformative processes going beyond single projects.
- Territorial cooperation needs to strengthen the alignment or cooperation with national and regional Cohesion Policy programmes, and also other EU national policies to upscale territorial cooperation achievements and support cooperation in other programmes.
- Joining forces and strengthening complementarities could include closer scrutinizing EU thematic priorities and policy objectives in light of the specific ways territorial cooperation can contribute to major transformations, and discussing for each relevant transformation, what a good division of labour between different cooperation initiatives could be.
- Joining forces between the EUSDR and other territorial cooperation initiatives should also include good cooperation among technical assistance structures as well as support during project developments and scaling up.

## **4 Policy pointers for Cohesion Policy post-2027**

The EU policy and funding frameworks for the period post-2027 will set important framework conditions for strengthen territorial cooperation in future, not at least in terms of funding opportunities. Danube countries and EUSDR stakeholders need to make themselves heard and noticed in the negotiations, and its preparation phase to prepare for ideal frameworks for cooperation in the Danube Region.

During the discussion, the following three strands of possible actions have emerged:

- Ensuring cooperation as horizontal dimension in EU policy frameworks – and where relevant in funding instruments (see below textbox on takeaways for future Cohesion Policy).



- Providing new access points for cooperation in EU enlargement / accession policy frameworks in the sense of contributions gradual integration (see below textbox on takeaways for Accession Policy).
- Continuing to develop the core EU cooperation instruments including Interreg and macro-regional strategies to even more effective cross-sectoral and multi-level policy instruments (see below textbox on takeaways for the future of Interreg).

To master the transformation challenges, EU policy frameworks need to stimulate territorial cooperation across all funding mechanisms, not only limited to Cohesion Policy. Cooperation needs to be part of the DNA of every EU policy. This also needs to be reflected in the next EU budget and the EU regulatory framework.

To strengthen the territorial cooperation and the territorial cohesion dimension in the European Semester, there is a need for well-defined priorities, a common sense of direction on which to base the work, e.g. for the country-specific recommendations. This could be a common territorial vision for Europe, setting out ideas for the future of the European territory, building on work of the Territorial Agenda 2030, and the territorial analysis provided by in the Cohesion Reports and by ESPON.

It is more necessary than ever to strengthen synergies between EU policies and between EU and national policies to mobilise more players and resources behind transformative efforts. There is a wide range of EU policies which provide hooks for effective cooperation in the Danube Region as well as in other macro-regions. To give some examples (more are listed in the annex): Cohesion Policy, the Circular Economy Action Plan, Critical Raw Materials Act, Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), Cybersecurity Strategy, Digital Europe Programme, EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, EU Strategy on Energy System Integration, European Green Deal, European Pillar of Social Right, Horizon Europe, Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA), Technical Support Instrument (TSI), etc. Further new instruments and policy priorities are expected to be developed by the next Commission, e.g. the Clean Industrial Deal, the European Prosperity Plan, an Affordable Housing Plan or the European Defence Industry Programmes.

### **Transformations will have an impact on EU policies post-2027 and on future Cohesion Policy**

The transformative aspects will affect cohesion and as a result directly change member states request towards Cohesion Policy and territorial cooperation. This concerns e.g. the thematic orientation going beyond support to green, digital and demographic transitions, and become more focused on transformative missions. It concerns also the links and synergies between Cohesion Policy and other EU and national policies as these need to work in conjunction to become transformative – not at least due to limited financial resources. It is important to continue to strengthen skills, lifelong learning as well as institutional and administrative capacities at all levels and in all countries to ensure that public policies and investments deliver the best possible returns.

The bottom line is: transformative changes require systemic interventions, institutional capacities, long-term commitments, citizens involvement, and, above all, stronger cooperation. Yet, interventions must go beyond piecemeal changes that do not address the root of the problem. Only systemic changes with increased cooperation, a long-term perspective, and a recognition of global development contexts can make regions fit for the future. A transformative journey is not merely an option; it is a necessity for ensuring a resilient, inclusive, and prosperous future.



They all can help the Danube Region to address the forthcoming transformations in a constructive way, building on the territorial diversity and cooperation structures of the region. To fully exploit this potential, these initiatives demand for recognition of the region's specific challenges and more effective policy frameworks.

#### **To support transformative changes EU policies need to**

- ensure that territorial cooperation becomes a mission across all policies;
- strengthen the territorial cooperation strands in Cohesion Policy;
- strengthen embedding cooperation in national and regional programmes;
- move from piecemeal initiatives to transformative actions going beyond single projects;
- test innovative transnational regulatory solutions e.g. for distance working or ecosystem services;
- ensure that a broader view on impacts of the combination of measures and projects is developed;
- strengthen institutional capacity building and the partnership approach in accession countries.

Traditionally, macro-regional strategies are closely linked to Cohesion Policy. The discussion about the future of Cohesion Policy points towards the need of the policy to become more transformative and put a stronger emphasis on institutional capacity building to strengthen the quality of government and governance thought out the Cohesion Policy community. Facilitation and simplification will remain key for the future of EU funds to allow the funds to be impactful.

#### **Takeaways / Policy pointers concerning the future of Cohesion Policy**

- Future Cohesion Policy should further strengthen embedding cooperation in national and regional programmes, both at programme and project level.
- Future Cohesion Policy needs to strengthen its support and focus on transformative investments with a clear place- and people-based approach.
- Future Cohesion Policy should mainstream capacity building support for public authorities at all levels.
- Future Cohesion Policy needs to be better aligned with the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA). IPA needs to learn from the approach to programming and partnership principle from Cohesion Policy to strengthen the involvement of stakeholders in accession countries.
- Cohesion Policy can help innovative and experimentative activities to thrive and form transformative journeys.

#### **Takeaways / Policy pointers for Cohesion Policy Managing Authorities**

- Future Cohesion Policy programmes need to strengthen embedding cooperation in programmes and projects. (How about macro-regional strategy representatives in the Monitoring Committees of national and regional programmes?).
- Future Cohesion Policy programmes need to strengthen the alignment of Cohesion Policy funding with other types of EU, national or regional funding. For example when it comes to rural development combined efforts of Cohesion Policy and Common Agricultural Policy are needed.
- Future programmes should be linked to specific / thematic transnational transformative roadmaps (e.g. concern development of key industrial sectors, or energy infrastructure).





## Providing new access points for cooperation in EU enlargement

Territorial cooperation needs to be an important aspect of the envisaged gradual accession of new EU member states, as afore mentioned. In light of the envisaged enlargements, dynamic re-evaluations are underway, encompassing geographical considerations, institutional reforms, enhanced competencies, and strategic funding allocations. In these processes, the perspective of added value of strengthened territorial cooperation – and especially the EUSDR – needs to be recognised. If enlargement processes fail to build on and underline the importance of territorial cooperation, they risk to further accelerate the fragmentation of the EU – where countries only fight for their own interests and advantages.

### Takeaways / Policy pointers concerning the Accession Policy

- Accession debates and policies should utilise the possibility of territorial cooperation initiatives – and especially the EUSDR – to engage citizen, civil society, enterprises as well as local and regional authorities in the preparation of accesses, showcasing how they can benefit and contribute.
- Accession debates and policies should address the potential of integrated solutions and transnational responses to pressing issues, e.g. by drawing on ‘transitional transformative roadmaps’.
- Future accession initiatives, such as the Western Balkan Initiatives, should directly link its ambitions where possible with the EUSDRs priorities.

## Continuing to develop the core EU cooperation instruments

Macro-regional strategies are an important cornerstone of territorial cooperation. Therefore, they are closely linked to Interreg. This link will remain important, also in future, specifically with the potential changes under a reformed Cohesion Policy. To enable the Danube Region – and other transnational cooperation regions – to shape forthcoming transformations, Interreg programmes need to tune into this wider mission, and recognise the diversity of European (macro-)regions.

Besides EU macro-regional strategies, many of the points raised in this paper align with the priorities and principles outlined in the Territorial Agenda 2030. Also, the Urban Agenda and Leipzig Charter address these issues. At a smaller geographical scale LEADER and CLLD communities as well as ITI strategies and to some degree Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) address these issues. All of them involve concrete projects, which could offer stepping stones for developing synergies and joining forces.

### Takeaways / Policy pointers concerning the future of Interreg

- Territorial cooperation needs to strengthen the alignment or cooperation with national and regional Cohesion Policy programmes, and also other EU national policies to upscale territorial cooperation achievements and support cooperation in other programmes.
- Interreg programmes involving potential future EU member states must become an instrument to prepare for enlargement – for players in both current and potential future EU member states.
- Interreg should help preparing cross-border transnational test cases for innovative regularity solutions, possibly linked to future cross-border mechanisms.



## **5 Need to act, now**

As Ursula von der Leyen put it in her speech to the EU Parliament on her candidacy for a second term as Commission President, we have the choice to either face up uncertainties alone, or unite our societies, and we also have the choice to be dependent, to let the divisions weaken us, or to be bold in our ambition.

Translated to the Danube Region context, this means we can picture the Danube Region as a bunch of places and people each individually being a recipient or in the worst case a victim to the changes ahead. Or, we can picture the Danube Region as a cooperation between places and people jointly shaping the transitions required. This eventually is a choice to be made. The EU with its cooperation tools and instruments offers a range of opportunities to address transformations jointly.

It is high time to shape the policy framework post-2027 'fit for cooperation' in the Danube Region. The mission letter by Ursula von der Leyen to the Executive Vice-President-designate for Cohesion and Reforms highlights the task to ensure the EU invests in and supports member states, regions, local authorities and people in view of achieving upward economic and social convergence across the EU and that all citizens have an effective right to stay in a place they call home. The Danube Region is home to 115 million inhabitants, many in regions with substantial transformations ahead of them.

The EUSDR can play a vital role in supporting a joint vision through its policy arenas and contribute to a deeper and wider Union also by facilitating forthcoming enlargements. Territorial cooperation can enable systemic interventions to master the transformation challenges. It should be part of the DNA of every EU policy. In many cases this implies major cooperation to generate sufficient critical mass to become transformative, as the issue at stake can only be addressed jointly by partners from a wider geography. EU macro-regional strategies with their Priority Areas and the political coordination in the Steering Groups offer specific unique opportunities to boost policy coordination across sectors, levels of government and countries, which is very much needed to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of policy making.

The EU budget and a range of EU policies – most notably Cohesion Policy – are essential for ensuring that these transformations can be approached, and that they can be approached through cooperation across administrative and sectorial borders. The increasing investment needs for transformation processes and a proliferation of policy objectives are, however, contrasted by contracting public finance both in the countries and at EU level.

2025 is the window of opportunity to create input to the negotiations and set EU agendas, as the more formal process on shaping the EU budget 2028+ and the strategic orientation of Cohesion Policy and other EU policies will start.



## ***ANNEX 1 – EU policies relevant for transformative cooperation***

To illustrate the breath and volume of the transformation challenges and cooperation ideas, the below is an incomplete quick collection of relevant EU initiatives and policies concerned by the transformations addressed in this think piece. The list is certainly incomplete. Still, it gives an overview of a wide range of relevant EU initiatives and policies that indicate the major shifts in policy agendas and new foci as the requirements for transformative policies become clearer. Reviewing the diversification of policy demands and priorities provided an important backdrop to this think piece, and outlining the major transformations.

### **2019-2024**

- **AI Act:** A proposed regulatory framework focused on ensuring the safety and fundamental rights of people and businesses while fostering innovation, investment, and trust in AI technologies.
- **Blue Card Directive (reformed):** Facilitates the admission and mobility of highly skilled workers from outside the EU to address labour shortages in key sectors.
- **Circular Economy Action Plan:** Aims to reduce waste and keep resources in use for as long as possible, contributing to the reduction of the EU's carbon footprint.
- **Civic Space and Civil Society Support:** Funding and policies to support civil society organisations that promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.
- **Cohesion Policy and European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF):** These can support sustainable development projects that align with net-zero land-take objectives, including urban regeneration and rural development.
- **Conference on the Future of Europe:** A participatory democracy initiative aimed at engaging citizens directly in discussions on EU priorities and reforms.
- **Coordinated Plan on AI:** Updated in 2021, this plan aims to accelerate investment in AI, make more data available for AI's development, foster talent, and ensure trust.
- **Counter-Terrorism Agenda:** Aims to prevent terrorism, cut off terrorists' access to funding, and strengthen resilience to radicalisation.
- **Critical Raw Materials Act:** Proposed to reduce dependencies on critical raw materials essential for digital and green transitions.
- **Cybersecurity Strategy:** The EU has developed a comprehensive strategy to bolster its cybersecurity capabilities, including the establishment of the European Cybersecurity Industrial, Technology and Research Competence Centre.
- **Digital Education Action Plan:** Aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age.
- **Digital Europe Programme:** Aims to accelerate the economic recovery and drive the digital transformation of Europe, focusing on high-performance computing, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and advanced digital skills.
- **EC Vice President for Promoting our European way of Life.** The Vice President is responsible for ensuring EU values are promoted across the EU.
- **Eco-design regulation and directive** for setting up requirements for the energy related products, focusing on durability, circularity and energy efficiency.
- **EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030:** Aims to protect nature and reverse the degradation of ecosystems, including commitments to protect land and restore degraded ecosystems.
- **EU Strategy on Energy System Integration:** Seeks to create a more interconnected and integrated energy system to support the green transition.
- **European Defence Fund (EDF):** Aims to foster innovation and technological development in defence, ensuring that the EU and its member states can protect and defend their interests.
- **European Democracy Action Plan:** Launched to protect elections, tackle disinformation, and support free and independent media.
- **European Digital Strategy:** Sets out a vision for the EU's digital future, focusing on technology that works for people, a fair and competitive digital economy, and an open, democratic, and sustainable society.



- **European Green Deal:** A set of policy initiatives aimed at making the EU climate-neutral by 2050, touching on all sectors of the economy. It aims to make the EU climate-neutral by 2050, with significant implications for energy transition through various initiatives, including the Fit for 55 package.
- **European Peace Facility:** Provides funding for military and defence support, which indirectly supports reconstruction by enhancing security.
- **European Social Fund Plus (ESF+):** Supports employment, education, and social inclusion, which can help mitigate the effects of demographic change.
- **Fit for 55 Package:** A comprehensive plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels, through a series of legislative and policy measures.
- **Horizon Europe:** The EU's key funding program for research and innovation, supporting technological development and collaboration between industry and academia.
- **Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry (LULUCF) Regulation:** Encourages sustainable land use practices and aims to increase the absorption of CO<sub>2</sub> through natural sinks.
- **Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) Packages:** The EU has provided financial assistance to support economic stabilisation and reforms in Ukraine, which could be expanded or adapted for reconstruction.
- **European Industrial Policy:** This policy should support the transition to a green and digital economy, increase the global competitiveness and strengthen the autonomy of the European economy.

#### 2014-2019

- **Clean Energy for All Europeans Package:** Focuses on providing secure, sustainable, and competitive energy within the EU.
- **Energy Union Framework:** Aims to ensure energy security, sustainability, and competitiveness, integrating national energy markets.
- **Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI:** Developed by the High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, these guidelines provide a framework for achieving ethical and trustworthy AI.
- **EU Global Strategy:** Provides the overarching framework for the EU's foreign and security policy, emphasising resilience, integrated approach to conflicts, and cooperative regional orders.
- **EU-Ukraine Association Agreement:** Although not specifically a reconstruction tool, it provides a framework for political association and economic integration, which could be pivotal in reconstruction efforts.
- **European Education Area:** An initiative aimed at fostering educational cooperation across Member States, making high-quality education and lifelong learning accessible. It is a cornerstone of the EU's efforts to strengthen education systems and support individuals' personal and professional development.
- **European Pillar of Social Rights:** Aims to ensure new and effective rights for citizens in a range of areas, including education, training, and lifelong learning.
- **GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation):** Provides a framework for data protection and privacy, crucial for building trust in digital services.

#### Pre-2014/ Fundamental rules

- **Copenhagen Criteria:** The criteria that define whether a country is eligible to join the EU, including political stability, a functioning market economy, and the adoption of the EU acquis (the body of EU law).
- **Enlargement Strategy and Negotiation Framework:** Guides the negotiation process for accession, tailored to each candidate country's specific situation and progress.
- **European Citizens' Initiative:** An initiative proposed in the EU Treaty, allowing EU citizens to directly participate in the EU policy development by proposing regulations on matters of their priority, provided that enough signatures across the EU are gathered.
- **Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Mechanism:** The EU's humanitarian aid and disaster response mechanisms could play a crucial role in addressing immediate humanitarian needs and rebuilding efforts.
- **Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA):** Financial tool designed to support reforms in the enlargement countries, aiding them in meeting EU standards.



## ***ANNEX 2 – Event and interviews***

Thanks for the possibilities to present and discuss our reflections at the EUSDR NC & PAC meeting (Jan. 2024), the EUSDR Reception at the Permanent Representation of Austria to the EU (June 2024), the EU MRS TRIO Presidencies meeting (June 2024), the EUSDR Annual Forum (June 2024) and the EUSDR PAC-Seminar (Sept 2024).

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