

Executive Summary

EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION (EUSDR) IMPLEMENTATION REPORT 2022-2023



EUSDR ACTIVITIES AND KEY PRIORITIES IN 2022-2023

The Danube Region has faced significant challenges in recent years, including the Russian **war of aggression against Ukraine** and its widespread consequences for the whole Region as well as **natural disasters** (heatwaves, droughts, and floods). Despite these challenges, there was a **recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic**, and the EUSDR members Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina achieved **EU candidate** status. Therefore, all non-EU EUSDR member states are now officially considered as EU accession countries. Overall key activities include EUSDR Governance Development, Monitoring and Evaluation, Embedding, Communication, Capacity Building as well as Youth involvement. The EUSDR was chaired by **Ukraine** in 2022 and **Slovenia** in 2023.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- The first EUSDR monitoring system was introduced in 2022, simplifying reporting for EUSDR Priority Areas
- The [EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028](#) ensures qualitative evaluations and supports the implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan
- The [Policy/Impact Evaluation](#) (published in 2022) confirms a solid governance and an effective use of processes and tools to support strategic implementation

Embedding

- [Embedding the EUSDR into \(EU\) funding programmes](#) aims to align EUSDR priorities with EU/non-EU funds via collaboration, networks and workshops, as well as coordinated efforts for joint implementation of activities
- In 2022 and 2023, the first two EUSDR Embedding Weeks were organised by the Danube Strategy Point, facilitating matchmaking between stakeholders and providing a forum for joint dialogue between programmes and the Strategy

Communication

- The [EUSDR Communication Strategy](#) enhances visibility and engagement through targeted tools and channels
- December 2023: 7 524 followers on [Facebook](#), 3 051 followers on [LinkedIn](#), 1 395 followers on [X](#), 310 followers on [Instagram](#), 76 subscribers on [YouTube](#)
- [Danube Strategy Flagships](#) are strategic projects/processes/initiatives that contribute to cohesion and quality of life in the Danube Region (2022: 27 Danube Strategy Flagships; 2023: 28 Danube Strategy Flagships)



Capacity Building

- EUSDR capacity building in 2022-2023 included targeted workshops, publications, and a [toolkit](#) to enhance the capacity of stakeholders
- 22 capacity building events in 2022-2023 (11 organised by the Danube Strategy Point, 11 organised by Interact)

Youth

- The [Danube Youth Council](#) (DYC) was established in 2022 to institutionalise youth involvement in EUSDR, bringing together 28 members between the age of 18-29 y.
- The [Danube Youth Organisations Network](#) (DYON) aims to enhance cooperation among youth organisations across the Danube Region

EUSDR Core Documents published in 2022/2023

[Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders \(2022\)](#)

[Proposal for the establishment of the EUSDR Danube Youth Council \(DYC\) & Danube Youth Organisations Network \(DYON\) \(2022\)](#)

[EUSDR Policy/Impact Evaluation \(2022\)](#)

[EUSDR Implementation Toolkit for Newcomers \(2022\)](#)

[4th European Commission Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies \(2022\)](#)

[Council Conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies \(2023\)](#)

[Updated Rules of Procedure of the EUSDR National Coordinators \(2023\)](#)

[Updated Rules of Procedure of the EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators \(2023\)](#)

[EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028 \(2023\)](#)

[Revised EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper \(2023\)](#)



DEVELOPMENTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN EUSDR PILLARS

Twelve **EUSDR Priority Areas (PAs)** represent fields of action in which the EUSDR is contributing to the implementation of the **EUSDR Action Plan**. The PAs are grouped into **four Pillars**, which address key challenges and opportunities in the Danube Region. These PAs, led by Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) and Steering Group (SG) members, are the core operational components of the Strategy, driving its implementation through sector-specific expertise and collaborative approaches. By identifying critical sectors, setting goals, and advancing key processes, the PAs contribute to the Strategy's success in tackling challenges and seizing opportunities. The 2022-2023 period highlighted significant **achievements, policy developments, and projects** made possible through the EUSDR framework, which would be difficult to accomplish without this coordinated approach.

EUSDR Governance Architecture (@ Danube Strategy Point)



EUSDR Pillar 1

Pillar 1 of the Danube Region Strategy aims to contribute to sustainable, inclusive and intelligent regional development through measures in the areas of **mobility, transport, energy, culture and tourism**. The overall focus is on improving connectivity in the Region.

Significant progress was made in improving Danube Region transport infrastructure with the **FAIRway Danube II** project advancing **fairway modernisation** and streamlining border controls through the **DAVID form digitalisation**, enhancing **shipping efficiency**.

A **study on reducing dependency on Russian gas** provided actionable recommendations, including fostering **geothermal energy** in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, supported by expert workshops and promoting **hydrogen** as a key future energy source.

Danube Strategy Flagship projects fostered cross-border collaboration to preserve **cultural heritage** and promote **sustainable tourism**, driving economic and social benefits.



Policy Impact

EUSDR Pillar 1 played a critical role in revising **TEN-T** guidelines and supporting the **EU Green Deal**, fostering regional cooperation to align transport and energy systems with EU goals for **decarbonisation** and **connectivity**.



Project/Process Implementation

Key projects like the **Danube Multimodal Corridors** and **SUSTANCE** enhanced **transport efficiency**, **reduced emissions**, and strengthened **connections** between EU members and EU accession countries.

€ 70 million funding

for the **FAIRway Danube II** project, with €47 million being co-funded by the EU.

ca. 100 participants

and 20 speakers during the **Danube Region Transport Days 2022** in Ljubljana, SI.





Danube Region Transport Days 2022, Ljubljana, SI (© EUSDR PA 1b)



Danube Ministerial Meeting on Fairway Rehabilitation, 2022, Lyon, FR (© EUSDR PA 1a)

EUSDR Pillar 2

The Danube basin hosts fragile ecosystems, prompting cooperation within EUSDR Pillar 2 to address climate change, resource sustainability, and environmental preservation. Joint measures focus on **restoring natural assets**, **managing risks**, and **preventing natural disasters**.

Notable progress was achieved in the fields of water quality management, biodiversity, and disaster resilience. Key efforts include the [Fish Migration Restoration Document](#), studies on Iron Gates barriers preventing fish migration, and the [Green Agriculture brochure](#) to reduce nutrient pollution.

Climate adaptation was advanced through the [Danube Hazard m3c](#) project and water-related conferences. **Biodiversity** initiatives included the [LIFE Boat 4 Sturgeon](#) project and the [Danube WILDIsland Ramsar Initiative](#).

Disaster preparedness improved via [DiMaND](#) and [PROFOUND](#), while **flood risk reduction** focused on [nature-based solutions](#), fostering transnational cooperation aligned with [EU Green Deal](#) priorities.



Policy Impact

EUSDR Pillar 2 activities resulted in policies that promote **sustainable agriculture** to reduce nutrient pollution, support **fish migration restoration** through detailed studies, and integrate nature-based solutions for **flood risk management**.



Project/Process Implementation

Project implementation focused on improving **water quality**, promoting sustainable agriculture, fish migration restoration, flood risk management, and **climate adaptation** through initiatives like [CLEANDANUBE](#), [DALIA](#), and [WePass2](#).

1.6 Million Sturgeons

to be released by 2030 as part of [LIFE Boat 4 Sturgeon](#) project.

300 young participants

in a [survey](#) on water protection attitudes in the Danube Region.

1 500 volunteers

engaged in Danube River restoration efforts during Danube Volunteers Days 2022.



The sturgeon, the Danube "Dinosaur" (© Pavriz Hajizada, pexels)



Danube Wild Islands (© Selmeczi-Kovács Ádám, DINPI)



EUSDR Pillar 3

Pillar 3 focuses on the Danube Region's diversity in innovation, education, and competitiveness, supporting and initiating activities to improve the **competitiveness**, enhance **research and innovation**, and to address developments in the **labour market** through coordinated efforts in the Danube Region.

In 2022-2023, EUSDR Pillar 3 achieved notable advancements in **research, innovation, and social inclusion**. Key successes include fostering cross-border cooperation, with initiatives like the Danube Tech Valley Initiative and the Danubius Young Scientist Awards recognising young research talent.

Pillar 3 enhanced **technology transfer** and innovation, supporting projects such as the Danube Transfer Center Network and Plan-C, which transforms the plastics **value chain**, and WE.Circular, which promotes **female entrepreneurship**.

Achievements were also made on **green skills** and **social inclusion** through the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE), and **digital education** projects like DigiUp 4.0 and EQET SEE.



Re-Opening of industrial sites as innovation hubs within the RIS4DANU project, Dolní Vítkovice, CZ (© Dolní Vítkovice)



The Danube Transfer Center Network has been certified as a Danube Strategy Flagship in 2023 (© EUSDR PA 8)



Bringing the Danube Region into Classrooms through the eTwinning Initiative (© OeAD/EUSDR PA 9)



Policy Impact

Pillar 3 aligned regional research with EU priorities, supported Horizon Europe, and enhanced **Smart Specialisation** implementation. Key projects such as RIS4DANU promoted **innovation hubs**, and the Danube Centres of Vocational Excellence platform advanced **green skills** and **social inclusion**.



Project/Process Implementation

Pillar 3 implemented projects, processes and networks through **EU funding alignments**, such as the EUSDR ESF network and Multilateral Danube Call, supporting joint research and workforce development. Initiatives like the Danube Tech Valley fostered **innovation** and **regional progress**.

over **100** participants

Involved in the Multilateral Danube Call across five countries, fostering cross-border research.

112 applications

for the Danubius Young Scientist Award in 2022, with 14 winners from each EUSDR country.

19 school projects

developed through the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE).



EUSDR Pillar 4

EUSDR Pillar 4 improves governance, cross-border cooperation, and **security** through joint actions, addressing corruption, organised crime, and multi-level governance, enhancing **institutional capacities** and a more secure Danube Region.

EUSDR Pillar 4 fostered advancements in cross-border cooperation and regional resilience. The Cross-border Emergency Healthcare Task Force addressed legal and operational barriers, improving **healthcare access** and coordination in emergency situations.

The SMART ERA network promoted digital, green, and social transformations in **rural areas**, reducing **brain-drain** and enhancing **digital skills**. The EUSDR ESF+ Network strengthened transnational collaboration for **social policies** aligned with macro-regional goals, while the Danube Participation Day bolstered **civil society engagement**.

In security, long-term initiatives like DARIF enhanced regional **police collaboration**, tackling mobile organised crime and improving **border control** through innovative tools and coordinated operations.

90 participants

attended on a conference on enhancing police cooperation to improve security and dismantling organised crime networks in EUSDR member states in October 2022.



Policy Impact

Pillar 4 drove policy impact by improving cross-border **healthcare** frameworks, fostering **rural digital and green transitions**, enhancing **civil society's** role in governance, and advancing **coordinated regional security strategies** against organised crime.



Project/Process Implementation

Within EUSDR Pillar 4, initiatives like the Cross-border Emergency Healthcare Task Force, the SMART ERA project for rural digitalisation, and the DARIF operations, fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and alignment with regional and EU strategic goals, were implemented.

11 EUSDR member states

have already organised a National Participation Day since its establishment, providing a platform to reconcile strategic objectives with concrete ways of cooperation.



Cross-border healthcare center in Gmünd, AT (© Healthacross MED Gmünd)



Police on the Danube operating within the framework of the 9th DARIF Joint Operation in September 2022 (© Polizeipräsidium Niederbayern/EUSDR PA 11)



IMPLEMENTATION AND ACTIVITIES ACROSS EUSDR PAs

The EUSDR's implementation integrates strategic frameworks across EUSDR PAs, focusing on **Digitalisation, Migration and Demographic Change**, as well as **Climate Change and Sustainable Development**. From 2022 to 2023, efforts prioritised leveraging project outcomes to strengthen policies, enhance collaboration, and support evidence-based decisions. **Steering Groups (SGs)** played a key role in advancing initiatives and stakeholder cooperation, with active contributions from many members, despite some variability in participation. The DSP supported cross-PA collaboration, event organisation, and communication efforts. **Horizontal activities** emphasised multi-level governance, knowledge-sharing, and result dissemination, driving sustainable and integrated development across EUSDR member states. **Capitalisation** integrated past project/process outcomes into new initiatives, enhancing policies and supporting sustainable development. **Cooperation with EUSDR core and external stakeholders**, supported by the DSP, is vital for implementing the Strategy, fostering engagement, aligning policies, enhancing visibility, and promoting cross-sector collaboration and capacity building. **Strategic policy development** focused on aligning EUSDR objectives with EU and national policies, integrating project outcomes, fostering multi-level governance, enhancing cooperation, and addressing key challenges like digitalisation, climate change, and demographic shifts.

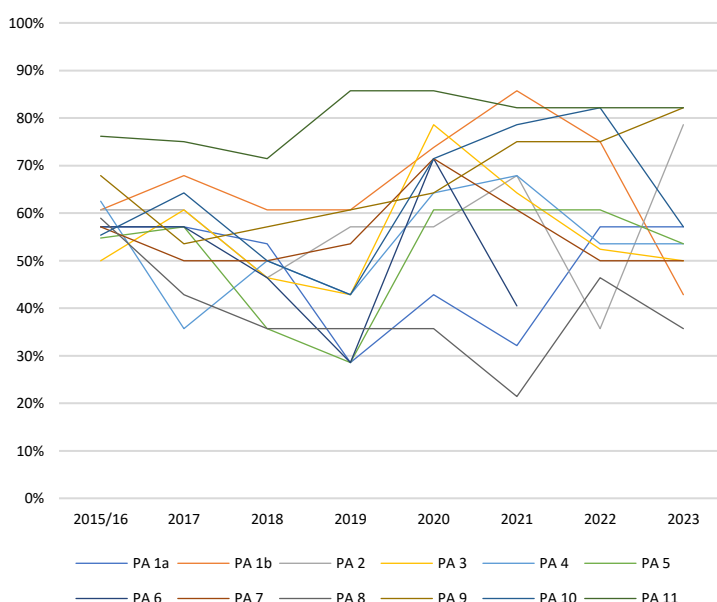
Horizontal Activities

Digitalisation: Digital platforms enable innovation and data-sharing, e.g., interactive portals for sustainable energy and e-learning tools for geothermal heating.

Migration & Demographic Change: Migration policies focus on skilled workers and integrating displaced persons, like supporting Ukrainian students and researchers.

Climate Change & Sustainable Development: Projects tackle climate change with nature-based solutions, fleet modernisation, circular economy, and supporting women in sustainable industries.

Participation in SG Meetings, 2015-2023, per EUSDR PA



Participation in SG Meetings, 2015-2023, per EUSDR PA

In the revised EUSDR Action Plan, three horizontal frameworks have been identified:

- Digitalisation
- Migration and Demographic Change
- Climate Change & Sustainable Development

Capitalisation

Building on results: New policies and strategies ensure continuity, like FAIRway Danube II informing national fairway rehabilitation plans.

Collaboration & knowledge sharing: Transnational work adapts practices, e.g., D-CARELABS results supporting social services development in Ukraine.

Leveraging outcomes: Scaling up successful initiatives, like the Disaster Management Working Group sharing transnational activities across regions.

Steering Groups and Governance Structure

48 SG meetings held in 2022/2023, facilitating decision-making, collaboration, and updates on current activities across EUSDR member states.

While **participation in SG meetings** remains varied, there are ongoing efforts to enhance engagement and foster broader involvement across the Region.

SG members contribute to **project/process development, recruiting experts, and identifying relevant policy initiatives**, thereby enhancing transnational cooperation.



Cooperation among EUSDR core stakeholders

European Commission – DG REGIO: The PACs and DG REGIO maintain a strong, collaborative relationship, characterised by active participation, regular communication, and support from DG REGIO in advancing PACs' activities and EU initiatives.

European Commission – line DGs other than DG REGIO: The PACs collaborate with various EC line DGs on key regional initiatives, including transport, environmental protection, disaster preparedness, and research, with notable progress in areas such as Horizon Europe and the European Green Deal. Examples include DG MARE, DG ENV, DG ECHO, DG HOME, DG RTD, DG EMPL, DG EAC and DG AGRI.

EUSDR National Coordinators (NCs): Most EUSDR PACs report a strong, positive relationship with NCs, who play a critical role in facilitating national-level coordination and supporting PA activities, with examples of active collaboration across multiple countries.

Other EUSDR Priority Areas (PAs): Cooperation among EUSDR PAs is generally positive, with regular exchanges and joint initiatives on overlapping topics like climate change and biodiversity, supported by the DSP, though some PAs exhibit limited engagement.

Steering Groups (SGs): Collaboration between PAs and SGs is regarded as valuable but faces challenges, including varying levels of engagement and disparities in thematic expertise, prompting recommendations for clearer orientation and more engaging activities to boost participation. Several PAs regularly attend each other's SG meetings and collaborate on shared topics, fostering cross-PA cooperation on common areas of interest.

	PA 1a	PA 1b	PA 2	PA 3	PA 4	PA 5	PA 6	PA 7	PA 8	PA 9	PA 10	PA 11
PA 1a												
PA 1b												
PA 2												
PA 3												
PA 4												
PA 5												
PA 6												
PA 7												
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PA 9												
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Cooperation among EUSDR PAs in 2022-2023 (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

Danube Strategy Point (DSP): Cooperation between PACs and the DSP is generally perceived as positive, with the DSP providing valuable support in technical platforms, communication, capacity-building, and promoting PAC activities, contributing to a productive partnership.

Danube Youth Council (DYC): Cooperation with the DYC is steadily improving, with several PAs involving DYC members in meetings, workshops, and events, and plans to deepen collaboration by increasing youth involvement and incorporating their perspectives in key initiatives.

Interreg Danube Region Programme (DRP): Cooperation with the DRP is highly effective, characterised by regular communication and robust support in administrative, financial, and technical matters, facilitating efficient collaboration and project implementation.

Managing Bodies of other European Funding Programmes: Cooperation with European funding program bodies varies. The EUSDR ESF network, for example, plays a key role in fostering collaboration and integrating EUSDR activities into strategic planning.

Other EU macro-regional strategies (MRS) representatives: Cooperation between PAs and representatives of other EU MRS is growing, with increased collaboration and knowledge sharing in areas like energy security, disaster management, and sustainable development, through joint initiatives and regular exchange.



Involvement and cooperation with other stakeholders

Academia: Cooperation with academia is ongoing and strong, with universities and research institutions contributing to joint meetings, project partnerships, and expert involvement in specific initiatives, including key task forces and events, although engagement has decreased in some areas.

Civil Society: Collaboration with civil society is strong, with NGOs and youth organisations actively involved in projects, working groups, and events, ensuring their expertise and contributions are central to EUSDR initiatives, such as disaster management and the Danube Participation Days.

Administrative Institutions: Cooperation with administrative institutions is facilitated through joint projects and participation in SG meetings, with national, local, and regional authorities playing a key role in disseminating information, leading thematic workshops, and supporting events and projects like the Danube Participation Day, the SMART ERA project or the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence.



Danube Participation Day 2023, Ljubljana, SI (© Danube Strategy Civil Society Forum)

National Associations: Cooperation with national associations in the EUSDR is strong, involving joint activities on topics like energy communities and active participation in thematic events, with Chambers of Commerce and business support organisations also playing key roles.

Business Sector: Cooperation with the business sector includes joint projects, SG meetings and workshops, focusing on SME participation in projects like BrAln (Bringing Artificial Intelligence towards SMEs), environmental initiatives such as migratory fish passages, and partnerships for knowledge exchange and financial support, fostering stronger stakeholder cooperation and capacity building.

Supranational Institutions: Cooperation has been strong with the Danube Commission, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), the International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC), and energy and environmental groups. Key partnerships include the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), the Energy Community, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Europol and Interpol, advancing progress in water management, energy, and security.



Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EUSDR, 12th EUSDR Annual Forum, Brdo pri Kranju, SI (© studioforma.si)

Strategic Policy Development

Policy Integration and Outputs: EUSDR activities have been embedded in key policies like the Fairway Rehabilitation Master Plan, the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, and energy decarbonisation, delivering outputs such as studies on water pollution, disaster management, and green energy initiatives.

Regional Impact and Recognition: EUSDR PAs bridge local actions with European priorities through stakeholder engagement and projects, contributing to territorial cohesion in the Danube Region. Their efforts are highlighted in policy documents such as joint statements, EUSDR Ministerial conclusions and work programmes.



CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

The 2022-2023 period was significantly impacted by the **unprovoked, unjustified and full-fledged war of aggression against Ukraine** since 24 February 2022 by the Russian Federation. In response, the EUSDR and its core stakeholders provided crucial support to Ukraine, including humanitarian aid, infrastructure rebuilding, and efforts to decarbonise Ukraine's heating sector. Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina gained EU candidate status, with the EUSDR focusing on supporting their EU integration through transnational initiatives and collaboration. The EUSDR has played a key role in **shaping EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy** by promoting collaboration on equal terms between EU countries and EU accession countries. EUSDR PAs have supported **civil society engagement, innovation, and capacity building**, helping EU candidate countries meet the criteria for EU accession. The focus on EU enlargement has been emphasised in key meetings and will continue to be a priority in the future.

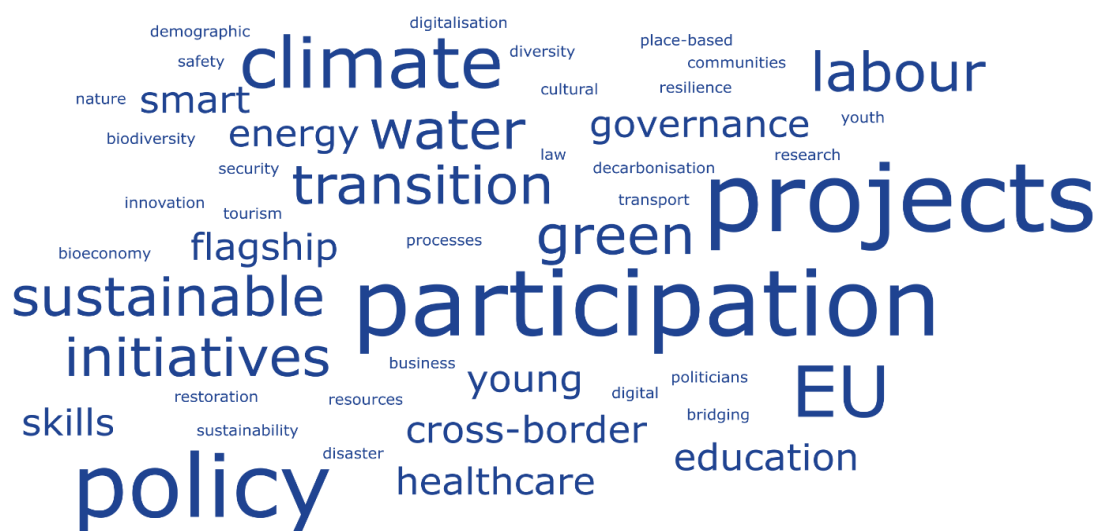
Main Conclusions and Lessons Learned in 2022-2023

- Setting **clear, realistic objectives** leads to more effective outcomes than overly ambitious goals.
- Regular **communication** with stakeholders is essential for maintaining engagement and participation.
- Involving **new stakeholders**, particularly youth, strengthens political commitment and national support.
- Hybrid meeting formats increase participation but reduce meaningful **personal interaction** in contrast to exclusively on-site meetings.
- **Flexibility** in approach and adapting to challenges is essential for continued progress.

Outlook on Future Activities

- Strengthening **links between EU MRS** boosts cooperation and knowledge sharing.
- Project outcomes should align more closely with **policymaking** to ensure practical results inform strategic decisions.
- A main focus will continuously be put on **sustainability, resilience**, and aligning efforts with broader **EU goals**.
- Ongoing support for **EU enlargement, Ukraine's recovery, and stakeholder engagement** boosts regional cohesion.
- Prioritising regional cooperation and knowledge exchange addresses gaps and promotes **innovation**.

The EUSDR's future development will focus on stronger integration of project outcomes into **policymaking**, advancing sustainability, resilience, and EU alignment. It will foster **innovation, regional cooperation**, and **stakeholder engagement** to address common challenges and opportunities and promote social, economic as well as territorial cohesion. A key priority is **supporting Ukraine** while strengthening ties between EU and EU accession countries. Moving forward, the EUSDR will aim to create a more **cohesive, responsive framework for sustainable growth and the implementation of its strategic actions** set in the [EUSDR Action Plan](#).



Main future topics of the EUSDR, based on the texts provided by the PAs in response to the question of the future developments in their fields of activity in a "word cloud" format



USEFUL LINKS AND FURTHER READING

Further information on key developments, activities and achievements in 2022 and 2023 can be found in the full version of the [EUSDR Implementation Report 2022-2023](#) and on the respective webpages of the EUSDR PAs:



[PA 1a \(Waterways Mobility\)](#)



[PA 1b \(Rail-Road-Air Mobility\)](#)



[PA 2 \(Sustainable Energy\)](#)



[PA 3 \(Culture & Tourism\)](#)



[PA 4 \(Water Quality\)](#)



[PA 5 \(Environmental Risks\)](#)



[PA 6 \(Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality\)](#)



[PA 7 \(Knowledge Society\)](#)



[PA 8 \(Competitiveness of Enterprises\)](#)



[PA 9 \(People & Skills\)](#)



[PA 10 \(Institutional Capacity & Cooperation\)](#)



[PA 11 \(Security\)](#)



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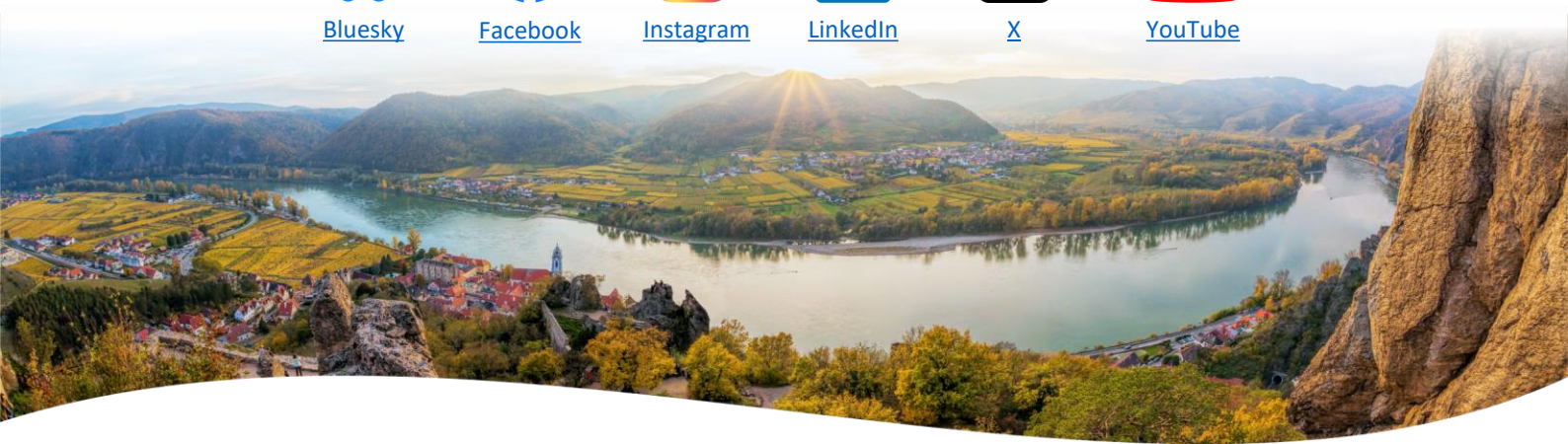
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IMPRESSUM

With special thanks to EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and their teams and to EUSDR National Coordinators and their teams active in the period 2022-2024.

The main sources of the EUSDR Implementation Report 2022-2023 are EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators' reports on the Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas via the EUSDR monitoring system and National Coordinators' reports to the European Commission, respectively, submitted in April/May 2024 for the period of 2022-2023.

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