

# EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Implementation Report 2022-2023



Final Report, December 2024

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

**Imprint:**

This Implementation Report aims at illustrating EUSDR developments and achievements in the period 2022-2023 by focusing on activities on general EUSDR level and especially by taking into account activities on EUSDR Priority Area level.

The main sources of this report 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. Furthermore, EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and National Coordinators provided feedback and additional information on the Draft Report in December 2024.

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## Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	10
2.	EUSDR Activities and Key Priorities in 2022-2023.....	11
2.1.	EUSDR Core Governance Meetings, Documents, and Processes.....	12
2.2.	Monitoring and Evaluation.....	18
2.3.	EUSDR Embedding.....	19
2.4.	Danube Strategy Flagships (Strategic Projects and Processes).....	25
2.5.	Communication Activities.....	27
2.6.	Capacity Building.....	40
2.7.	Youth Involvement.....	44
3.	Developments and Achievements in EUSDR Priority Areas.....	48
3.1.	Pillar 1 – Connecting the Danube Region.....	48
	PA 1a Waterways Mobility.....	48
	PA 1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility.....	50
	PA 2 Sustainable Energy.....	52
	PA 3 Culture & Tourism.....	54
3.2.	Pillar 2 – Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region.....	55
	PA 4 Water Quality.....	55
	PA 5 Environmental Risks.....	58
	PA 6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality.....	60
3.3.	Pillar 3 – Building Prosperity in the Danube Region.....	63
	PA 7 Knowledge Society.....	63
	PA 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises.....	65
	PA 9 People & Skills.....	67
3.4.	Pillar 4 – Strengthening the Danube Region.....	70
	PA 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation.....	70
	PA 11 Security.....	72
4.	Implementation and Activities across EUSDR Priority Areas.....	74
4.1.	Horizontal Activities.....	74
4.2.	Capitalisation.....	77
4.3.	Steering Groups and Governance Structure.....	84
4.4.	Cooperation with EUSDR core and other stakeholders.....	93
4.5.	Strategic Policy Development.....	102
5.	Conclusions and Outlook.....	107

## Table of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ASP	Associated Strategic Partner
AT	Austria
B2B	Business-to-Business
BA	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BG	Bulgaria
BSF	Bled Strategic Forum
BW	Baden-Württemberg
BY	Bavaria
CECE	Central European Cooperation in Education and Training
CEF	Connecting Europe Facility
CoVE	Centres of Vocational Excellence
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CZ	Czechia
DARIF	Danube River Forum
DE	Germany
DG ENER	Directorate-General for Energy
DG ENV	Directorate-General for Environment
DG MOVE	Directorate-General for Mobility and Transport
DG NEAR	Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
DIAS	Danube Region Invasive Alien Species Network
DLTF	Danube Landscape Task Force
DMWG	Disaster Management Working Group
DPD	Danube Participation Day
DRP	Danube Region Programme
DRTD	Danube Region Transport Days
DSP	Danube Strategy Point
DSTF	Danube Sturgeon Task Force
DTC	Danube Transfer Center
DTP	Danube Transnational Programme
DTVI	Danube Tech Valley Initiative
DYC	Danube Youth Council
DYN	Danube Youth Network
DYON	Danube Youth Organisations Network
EaSI	Employment and Social Innovation
EC	European Commission
EGD	European Green Deal
EP	European Parliament
ERA	European Research Area
ERI SEE	Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe
ESF	European Social Fund
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds
ESPON	European Spatial Planning Observation Network

ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
EUSAIR	EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian Region
EUSALP	EU Strategy for the Alpine Region
EUSBSR	EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	EU Strategy for the Danube Region
GWP	Global Water Partnership
HLG	High Level Group
HR	Croatia
HU	Hungary
IAWD	International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area
ICPDR	International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River
IPA	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
IRENA	International Renewable Energy Agency
ISRBC	International Sava River Basin Commission
JRC	Joint Research Centre
JS	Joint Secretariat
LoR	Letter of Recommendation
MA	Managing Authority
MD	Republic of Moldova
ME	Montenegro
MRS	Macro-regional strategy
MOCG	Mobile Organised Crime Group
MSTC	Multilateral scientific and technical cooperation
NC	National Coordinator
NCP	National Contact Point
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OP	Operational Programme
ÖROK	Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning
PA	Priority Area
PAC	Priority Area Coordinator
PCY	Presidency
RIS	River Information Services
RIS3	Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation
RO	Romania
RoP	Rules of Procedure
RS	Republic of Serbia
R&I	Research and Innovation
S3	Smart Specialisation Strategies
SG	Steering Group
SG DANUVAL	Steering Group for Evaluation in the EUSDR
SI	Slovenia
SK	Slovakia
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise



SMF	Seed Money Facility
SONDAR	Soil Strategy Network in the Danube Region
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
TF	Task Force
UA	Ukraine
UN	United Nations
UNECE ITC	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Inland Transport Committee
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WG	Working Group

## Figures

Figure 1: EUSDR Map (© Danube Strategy Point, 2024).....	10
Figure 2: Agenda of the EUSDR Embedding Week 2022, organised under the UA EUSDR PCY, facilitated by the DSP .....	22
Figure 3: Agenda of the EUSDR Embedding Week 2023, organised under the SI EUSDR PCY, facilitated by the DSP .....	23
Figure 4: Danube Strategy Flagship logo .....	25
Figure 5: EUSDR Brandbook .....	27
Figure 6: Post about the NYC on the EUSDR Instagram page .....	29
Figure 7: Post about the NYC on the EUSDR Instagram page .....	29
Figure 8: New sub-pages on the EUSDR website .....	31
Figure 9: 1 <sup>st</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week Review 2022 .....	32
Figure 10: 2 <sup>nd</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week Review 2023 .....	32
Figure 11: EuroAccess logo.....	32
Figure 12: EUSDR Online Media Campaign, 2022 .....	32
Figure 13: EUSDR Website Audience Overview, 15 May 2021 - 29 June 2021 .....	33
Figure 14: EUSDR Website Audience Overview, 30 June 2021 - 24 July 2021 .....	33
Figure 15: EUSDR Website Audience Overview, 15 May 2022 - 19 June 2022 .....	34
Figure 16: EUSDR Website Audience Overview, 30 June 2022 - 24 July 2024 .....	34
Figure 17: Promotion of the 11 <sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Košice, SK, organised under the UA EUSDR PCY.....	35
Figure 18: Promotion of the 12 <sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Brdo pri Kranju, SI, organised under the SI EUSDR PCY.....	35
Figure 19: Ministerial Meeting, 2022 .....	36
Figure 20: Ministerial Meeting, 2023 .....	36
Figure 21: Anja Filipović, NYC member (left), Petra Česen Čatar, Slovenian NC (right) at the Knowledge Driven Society Conference, 2023 .....	37
Figure 22: The Danube Region at the turn of times conference, 2023 (© PA 8).....	37
Figure 23: EU Strategy for the Danube Region: Stories that make us (cover) .....	38
Figure 24: Impressions of the EUSDR NC/PAC Workshop, 28-30 June 2022, Oradea, RO (© Danube Strategy Point, 2022).....	41
Figure 25: Impressions of the 1st Danube Youth Camp, 12-16 December 2022, Vienna, AT (© Danube Strategy Point, 2022).....	45
Figure 26: Capitalisation of results in the EUSDR PAs (based on PAC Reporting 2024).....	78
Figure 27: Interlinking of activities/processes and/or projects (based on PAC Reporting 2024) .....	80
Figure 28: Leverage of implemented activities on different levels (based on PAC Reporting 2024)....	82
Figure 29: Dissemination of results (based on PAC Reporting 2024).....	84
Figure 30: Average Participation (= Number of participations divided by the number of SG meetings in 2022), per EUSDR Country and PA (based on PAC Reporting 2024) .....	87
Figure 31: Average Participation (= Number of participations divided by the number of SG meetings in 2023), per EUSDR Country and PA (based on PAC Reporting 2024) .....	87
Figure 32: Participation in SG meetings, 2015-2023, per EUSDR PA (based on PAC Reporting 2024) .	89
Figure 33: Regular updates by SG Members on developments in their thematic expertise (based on PAC Reporting 2024) .....	90
Figure 34: Transmission of SG meeting outcomes to national levels/NCs (based on PAC Reporting 2024).....	91



Figure 35: Cooperation with other stakeholders (based on PAC Reporting 2024) ..... 98  
Figure 36: Future topics of the EUSDR (based on PAC Reporting 2024) ..... 109

## Tables

Table 1: Meetings at EUSDR core governance level 2022-2023 .....	12
Table 2: TOP 5 topics as identified in the UA EUSDR PCY Guidance Paper 2022.....	20
Table 3: List of Danube Strategy Flagship, 2022 and 2023 .....	25
Table 4: Capacity building events organised by DSP/Cross-MRS Capacity Building events facilitated or organised by Interact in 2022 and 2023.....	41
Table 5: EUSDR Priority Areas' contributions to EUSDR horizontal frames .....	74
Table 6: List of Steering Group meetings in 2022 and 2023 .....	84
Table 7: Working Groups/Task Forces in 2022 and 2023.....	89
Table 8: Cooperation among PAs (based on PAC Reporting 2024).....	95
Table 9: Cooperation of PAs with representatives of other MRS (based on PAC Reporting 2024) .....	97

## 1. Introduction

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Implementation Report 2022-2023 provides an overview on the developments and achievements of the EUSDR in the period 2022-2023. A special emphasis is put on the activities of the EUSDR National Coordinators (NCs) and EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) as well as the Steering Groups (SGs) within the respective EUSDR Priority Areas (PAs). This EUSDR Implementation Report 2022-2023 builds upon the previous EUSDR Implementation Reports, covering the periods 2016-2018<sup>1</sup>, 2019<sup>2</sup> as well as 2020-2021<sup>3</sup>.

The EUSDR Implementation Report 2022-2023 is based on the Reports on the Progress and Achievements of the EUSDR Priority Areas (“PAC Reporting”) as well as the National Coordinator’s Reports to the European Commission (EC) for the 5<sup>th</sup> Report on the Implementation of macro-regional strategies (to be published 2025).

Chapter 2 gives an overview of the activities carried out within the framework of the EUSDR in the reporting period 2022-2023. In Chapter 3, the main developments and achievements of EUSDR PAs are summarised. Chapter 4 highlights the implementation of the Strategy, focusing on horizontal activities, capitalisation, the SGs, cooperation with EUSDR core and external stakeholders as well as strategic policy development. The conclusions of this EUSDR Implementation Report and respective outlooks are summarised in Chapter 5. The Annex to this EUSDR Implementation Report gives more detailed insights into the PAs’ progress in implementing the actions of the 2020 revised EUSDR Action Plan<sup>4</sup>.



Figure 1: EUSDR Map (© Danube Strategy Point, 2024)

<sup>1</sup> EUSDR Implementation Report 2016-2018. [Online](#).

<sup>2</sup> EUSDR Implementation Report 2019. [Online](#).

<sup>3</sup> EUSDR Implementation Report 2020-2021. [Online](#).

<sup>4</sup> EUSDR Action Plan, 2020. [Online](#).

## 2. EUSDR Activities and Key Priorities in 2022-2023

The reporting period of this EUSDR Implementation Report, covering the period from 2022 to 2023, is characterised by a multitude of events that had a major impact on the Danube Region.

In February 2022, the world was shaken by Russia's **unprovoked, unjustified and full-fledged war of aggression against Ukraine** – the country that had just taken over the chair of the EUSDR. Since the outbreak of the war, the European and international community have witnessed air strikes, shelling of cities, flows of refugees, attacks and atrocities against one of the countries of the Danube Region and its people. The EUSDR strongly condemns Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military invasion and unprecedented war of aggression against Ukraine. The EUSDR considers this deliberate attack on a sovereign state as a violation of international law and the principles of the UN Charter, and as undermining of European and global security and stability. The Ministers responsible for the EUSDR called for the aggression to stop, the Russian forces to withdraw from the internationally recognised territory of Ukraine and all those responsible for war atrocities to be held accountable<sup>5</sup>. The Ministers expressed full solidarity with the people of Ukraine, reiterated full support for the country's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, within its internationally recognised borders, including territorial waters, and encouraged all EUSDR stakeholders to make use of the structures offered by the EUSDR in supporting Ukraine and in contributing to its reconstruction<sup>6</sup>.

At the same time, the Danube Region was heavily affected by a multitude of **natural disasters** in 2022 and 2023. Prolonged heatwaves and droughts led to significant crop failures, water shortages and forest fires. The water level of the Danube fell to its historic lows, which impacted shipping and the availability of water supplies. At the same time, heavy rainfall led to severe floods, putting residents in danger and causing immense damage to infrastructure and agriculture.

While the reporting period of the last EUSDR Implementation Report (2020-2021) was characterised by the consequences of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, the current reporting period has seen a return to normality in this regard. The tourism sector, for example, saw a recovery from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, with sustainable growth being ensured. EUSDR core governance meetings were held mostly in presence again, facilitating effective mutual exchange and dialogue.

In June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova officially received the status of **EU accession candidates**. Bosnia and Herzegovina also received this status in December 2023. EUSDR stakeholders perceived it as very encouraging that all of the EUSDR member states are now either EU members or EU accession candidates. It is indicative of the long-standing efforts, also promoted by the EUSDR for many years, and reforms in the countries to move closer towards the European Union and an important step for an even deeper integration and joint cooperation in the Danube Region.

Within the reporting period, the Strategy was chaired by Ukraine in 2022 and Slovenia in 2022/2023. In November 2023, Austria assumed the EUSDR Presidency.

Beside the core governance activities carried out by the EUSDR Presidencies (PCIES), the NCs and PACs as well as the thematic activities carried out by the PACs, especially monitoring and evaluation, EUSDR embedding, strategic projects and processes (Danube Strategy Flagships), communication, capacity building as well as youth involvement, were high on the agenda of the EUSDR in 2022 and 2023 and

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<sup>5</sup> Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>6</sup> Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, 2023. [Online](#).

facilitated by the Danube Strategy Point (DSP). These topics were particularly discussed at meetings at EUSDR core governance level.

## 2.1. EUSDR Core Governance Meetings, Documents, and Processes

### EUSDR Core Governance Meetings

In the reporting period, EUSDR core stakeholders met regularly to address key aspects regarding the implementation of the Strategy. Additionally, two EUSDR Annual Fora were held, one in Košice, SK, organised by the UA EUSDR PCY with support from the SK EUSDR (TRIO) PCY member, and one in Brdo pri Kranju, SI, organised by the SI EUSDR PCY. Table 1 provides an overview of key meetings held at EUSDR core governance level in 2022 and 2023, in chronological order:

*Table 1: Meetings at EUSDR core governance level 2022-2023*

Type	Date & Place	Focus
<b>NC meeting (incl. TRIO PCY meeting)</b>	22 February 2022 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current activities of UA EUSDR PCY</li> <li>• Transnational Hackathon on Sustainable Development of the Danube Region (planned)</li> <li>• Establishment of Danube Youth Council</li> <li>• Recap of 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary activities of EUSDR in 2021 on national levels</li> <li>• EUSDR Embedding</li> <li>• Future of DTP – Programming and governance support</li> <li>• Report by DSP on current activities</li> </ul>
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> EU MRS Week (incl. 4 EU MRS TRIO PCYs Meeting)</b>	7-11 March 2022 Brussels, BE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open discussion among 4 EU MRS TRIO PCIES</li> <li>• Young innovators as drivers of macro-regional development</li> <li>• Mobilisation of people, institutions and funds for the implementation of the European Green Deal</li> <li>• Different parallel workshops</li> </ul>
<b>HLG meeting</b>	11 March 2022 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embedding MRS priorities in 2021-27 EU funding programmes and role of MRS for a post COVID-19 recovery</li> <li>• Engagement of civil society</li> </ul>
<b>5<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Chairpersons of the National Coordination Groups of the EU MRS and the EC (MRS TRIO PCIES Meeting)</b>	11 March 2022 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisation of the MRS Annual For a – lessons learnt</li> <li>• Cross-MRS cooperation on PAC level</li> </ul>
<b>TRIO PCY meeting</b>	4 May 2022 Zagreb, HR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – discussion on how the EUSDR can support Ukraine in a targeted way</li> <li>• Updates by DTP</li> <li>• Inclusion of youth in EUSDR</li> <li>• EUSDR Embedding</li> <li>• Danube Strategy Flagships</li> <li>• Monitoring</li> </ul>
<b>NC- PAC meeting (incl. TRIO PCY meeting)</b>	19 May 2022 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current activities of the EC</li> <li>• Updates by DTP</li> <li>• PAC exchange on current activities in EUSDR PAs</li> <li>• EUSDR Embedding</li> <li>• Youth activities in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Report by DSP on current activities</li> </ul>
<b>TRIO PCY meeting</b>	19 July 2022 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum – programme and Ministerial declaration</li> </ul>
<b>TRIO PCY meeting</b>	31 August 2022 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum – programme, Ministerial declaration and side events/exhibitions</li> </ul>

Type	Date & Place	Focus
<b>NC-PAC meeting (incl. TRIO PCY meeting)</b>	29 September 2022 Vienna, AT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current activities of the UA EUSDR PCY</li> <li>• Organisation of the 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum</li> <li>• Updates by DRP on PAC, DSP, SMF and upcoming calls</li> <li>• Updates on EUSDR national developments</li> <li>• EUSDR PAC exchange &amp; information</li> <li>• Look ahead into the 2023 SI EUSDR PCY</li> </ul>
<b>PAC meeting</b>	30 September 2022 Vienna, AT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum – thematic sessions &amp; side events</li> <li>• Current activities of the EC</li> <li>• PAC exchange on cross-cutting PA/MRS activities, involvement of SGs and exchange with NCs on a more regular basis, promotion and added value of Danube Strategy Flagships, implementation of PA activities/PAC projects</li> <li>• Report by DSP on current and future activities</li> </ul>
<b>11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum</b>	19-20 October 2022 Košice, SK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting of Ministers responsible for the EUSDR</li> <li>• Challenges and opportunities for the Danube Region</li> <li>• Handover ceremony of the EUSDR PCY to SI</li> <li>• Energy security and sustainable economy of the Region</li> <li>• Different parallel sessions</li> <li>• EUSDR Embedding</li> </ul>
<b>6<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Chairpersons of the National Coordination Groups of the EU MRS and the EC (MRS TRIO PCIES Meeting)</b>	24 November 2022 Trento, IT	
<b>Informal NC- PAC meeting (incl. TRIO PCY meeting)</b>	1-2 December 2022 Brdo pri Kranju, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation of SI EUSDR PCY programme</li> <li>• Empowering for involvement and strengthening the ownership of countries and regions in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Unlocking the potential of MRS cooperation for non-EU countries and regions</li> </ul>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Danube Youth Camp</b>	12-16 December 2022 Vienna, AT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DYC teambuilding</li> <li>• Capacity building: newly appointed DYC members learning about the EUSDR and the PAs</li> <li>• DYC members defining their fields of involvement in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Establishing DYC-internal structures and Rules of Procedure (RoP)</li> </ul>
<b>PAC meeting</b>	16-17 March 2023 Maribor, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current activities of the SI EUSDR PCY</li> <li>• Current activities of the EC</li> <li>• PAC exchange on recent and upcoming activities</li> <li>• Inclusion of youth in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Project site visit – National Supercomputing Centre HPC RIVR (part of EURO HPC Joint Initiative) at University of Maribor</li> <li>• Follow-up of PAC and informal NC-PAC/PAC meeting and concrete steps for supporting stakeholder involvement in EUSDR PAs</li> <li>• Report by DSP on current activities</li> <li>• Updates by DRP</li> </ul>
<b>TRIO PCY meeting</b>	5 April 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up of the NC/PAC meeting</li> <li>• Planning of the 4 MRS TRIO PCY meeting</li> <li>• EUSDR response to the Council Conclusions on EU MRS</li> <li>• 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum and Ministerial meeting</li> </ul>
<b>TRIO PCY meeting</b>	25 April 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning of the HLG meeting</li> <li>• Planning of the 4 TRIO PCY meeting</li> </ul>
<b>HLG meeting</b>	28 April 2023 Brussels, BE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4<sup>th</sup> European Commission report on the implementation of EU MRS</li> <li>• Council conclusions on the 4<sup>th</sup> European Commission report</li> <li>• Strategy governance, boosting political ownership</li> </ul>
<b>7<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Chairpersons of the National Coordination Groups of the EU MRS and the EC</b>	28 April 2023 Brussels, BE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation of the draft Framework for Cooperation by SI EUSDR PCY</li> <li>• Exchange on the draft Framework of Cooperation</li> </ul>

Type	Date & Place	Focus
<b>(MRS TRIO PCIES Meeting)</b>		
<b>NC meeting (incl. TRIO PCY meeting)</b>	16 May 2023 Brdo pri Kranju, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SI EUSDR PCY – Current activities and outlook for 2023</li> <li>• Current activities of the EC</li> <li>• Inclusion of youth in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Discussion on guidelines for empowering involvement in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Updates by DRP</li> <li>• EUSDR Embedding – Embedding guidance paper, EUSDR MA network meeting and EUSDR Embedding Week</li> <li>• Follow-up of concrete steps for supporting stakeholder involvement in PAs</li> <li>• Report by DSP on current activities</li> </ul>
<b>NC-PAC meeting (incl. TRIO PCY meeting)</b>	18-19 September 2023 Portorož, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current activities of the EC</li> <li>• Preparation of the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum and Ministerial meeting</li> <li>• Tour de Table of PACs</li> <li>• Tour de Table of NCs</li> <li>• Youth activities in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Presentation of guidelines on empowering involvement in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Follow-up of concrete steps for supporting stakeholder involvement in PAs</li> <li>• Updates by DRP</li> <li>• Decision making: Extension of eligibility in the 2<sup>nd</sup> SMF call to the entire territory of Ukraine</li> <li>• Report by DSP on current activities</li> <li>• Presentation of AT EUSDR PCY programme</li> </ul>
<b>8<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Chairpersons of the National Coordination Groups of the EU MRS and the EC (MRS TRIO PCIES Meeting)</b>	19 September 2023 Izola, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up discussion on the draft Framework for Cooperation</li> <li>• Monitoring of MRS Embedding</li> </ul>
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Danube Youth Camp</b>	21-23 October 2023 Šempeter pri Gorici, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection of the first DYC mandate year</li> <li>• Planning of activities for the second DYC mandate year</li> <li>• DYC teambuilding</li> <li>• Participation in the POPRI Startup Challenge on the topic of brain drain in the Danube Region</li> <li>• Elaboration of content for the youth panel, to be held at the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, also focusing on brain drain</li> </ul>
<b>12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum</b>	24-25 October 2023 Brdo pri Kranju, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion of youth in the EUSDR</li> <li>• Meeting of Ministers responsible for the EUSDR</li> <li>• EU enlargement process</li> <li>• Handover ceremony of the EUSDR PCY to AT</li> <li>• Future cooperation and development on the Danube Region and the role of the DRP</li> <li>• Support for UA and MD on their way to the EU</li> <li>• Competences and skills of future professions</li> <li>• Presentation of DRP call for proposal</li> <li>• Transport infrastructure projects for improved connectivity</li> <li>• Hydrogen economy in the Danube Region</li> <li>• Current and future water challenges</li> <li>• Funding through and beyond IPA III/NDICI in the Danube Region</li> </ul>
<b>TRIO PCY meeting</b>	15 December 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information about the AT EUSDR PCY programme</li> <li>• Exchange on topics relevant for the past and future EUSDR PCIES</li> <li>• Upcoming EUSDR NC/PAC meeting on 29-30 January 2024</li> </ul>

## **EUSDR Core Governance Development and Respective Documents**

In addition to the meetings held at EUSDR core governance level, key documents were prepared and published in the reporting period.

In 2022, the report of the **Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders**<sup>7</sup> has been published. It features a stakeholder management and stakeholder engagement analysis of the importance of collaboration for the EUSDR as well as an analytical-explorative part, highlighting the need for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders for a successful implementation of the EUSDR. The publication provides practical activities and ready-to-use tools to support and facilitate the identification of relevant EUSDR stakeholders, the dialogue and knowledge sharing between the EUSDR stakeholders and identified relevant capacity building approaches based on the needs expressed by the PACs and their teams.

In March 2022, the **Proposal for the establishment of the EUSDR Danube Youth Council (DYC) and Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON)**<sup>8</sup> was endorsed by the NCs. It lays the groundwork for the involvement of youth, youth organisations and initiatives from the Danube Region into the EUSDR and its governance in order to promote the visibility of youth perspectives as well as the contribution of young people and youth organisations to the implementation of the Strategy, by not only bringing in new perspectives, but also to provide the young generation with opportunities for real impact.

The final report of the **Policy/Impact Evaluation** of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region<sup>9</sup> has been published in May 2022, highlighting that the Strategy implementation is based on a solid governance structure with a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities and providing pathways for further improvements of the Strategy.

At EC-level, the **4<sup>th</sup> Report from the Commission** to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions **on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies**<sup>10</sup> was published in December 2022, followed by the **Council Conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies**<sup>11</sup> in June 2023.

The **EUSDR Evaluation Plan**<sup>12</sup>, defining the procedure for the EUSDR evaluation activities for the period from 2023 to 2028, was published in September 2023.

Following discussions on **EUSDR-internal governance processes and the needs assessed** in this regard at the PAC meeting on 30 September 2022 in Vienna, AT, the PAC meeting on 16-17 March 2023 in Maribor, SI, the NC meeting on 15-16 May 2023 in Brdo pri Kranju, SI, and at the NC-PAC meeting on 18-19 September 2023 in Portorož, SI, a **Task Force on EUSDR Governance Development** was established<sup>13</sup>. Closer coordination and communication, together with a better understanding of the concrete roles and the relationships among the EUSDR stakeholders, were considered as key aspects for a more effective cooperation and for an improved implementation of the EUSDR. The discussions further included, among others, reflections on the needs on how to improve the responsiveness of the EUSDR to fast emerging challenges in the Region, on raising the political impact and relevance of the

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<sup>7</sup> Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>8</sup> Proposal for the establishment of the EUSDR Danube Youth Council (DYC) & Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON), 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>9</sup> Policy/impact evaluation of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>10</sup> Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>11</sup> Council Conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>12</sup> EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>13</sup> Task Force EUSDR Governance Development establishment. [Online](#).

EUSDR as well as ideas on how to jointly involve all governance levels and provide a common ground for cross-sectoral and thematic exchange.

In November 2023, the **EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper**<sup>14</sup>, which defines the roles, responsibilities and interdependencies of EUSDR core stakeholders, was jointly revised according to the discussions on EUSDR internal governance processes. The document aims at further improving coordination and cooperation in view of enhancing the commitment to the Strategy and at supporting the development of the necessary administrative capacity ensuring that political commitment translates into an effective implementation of the EUSDR. In parallel to the revision of the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, the **Rules of Procedure for Meetings** of EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators<sup>15</sup> as well as of National Coordinators<sup>16</sup> were updated in August 2023 together with all EUSDR key stakeholders. Following the involvement of the EUSDR core stakeholders, all documents were endorsed by EUSDR NCs in written procedure.

### **Coordination Mechanisms and Platforms on National Level**

On national level, coordination mechanisms and platforms were used to support the implementation of the EUSDR, reflecting the need for political commitment of EUSDR member states. For the reporting period 2022/2023, several platforms and instruments have been highlighted by the NCs within the respective EUSDR member states.

In **Austria**, the national coordination platform for macro-regional strategies (including EUSDR and EUSALP) and for transnational Interreg programmes has been placed within the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK). This platform involves sectoral ministries, regions and representatives of local authorities, allowing for a multi-level governance approach where all stakeholders operate at eye level. The platform is supported by the AT coordination platform for the EUSDR which facilitates coordination and communication among stakeholders, ensuring that information flows smoothly between different levels of government and civil society.

In **Baden-Württemberg**, DE, the coordination involves a strong inter-ministerial approach, where regional Strategy representatives from different (state) ministries participate in regular meetings to discuss the progress and implementation of EUSDR-related activities. Additionally, local authorities, regional development agencies as well as civil society organisations are engaged in the coordination process. This multi-level governance approach aims to ensure that various perspectives and needs are considered in the implementation of the Strategy.

The coordination in **Bavaria**, DE, includes involvement from local and regional actors, with municipalities actively participating in activities with macro-regional relevance (EUSDR and EUSALP). The political level is engaged in EUSDR-related topics, with the Bavarian state government being involved in high-level events and conferences related to the EUSDR. Since Bavaria is also engaged in the EUSALP, efforts are being made to generate and utilise synergies, e.g., through coordinated activities.

In **Bulgaria**, the national coordination mechanism for the implementation of the EUSDR is organised into two tiers and involves different sector Ministries. At the political level, the National High Level Group, led by the Minister of Regional Development and Public Works, along with Ministers

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<sup>14</sup> EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>15</sup> Rules of Procedure for Meetings of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region Priority Area Coordinators, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>16</sup> Rules of Procedure for Meetings of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region National Coordinators, 2023. [Online](#).

responsible for the 12 EUSDR PAs, coordinate the implementation activities. The NC oversees the operational coordination at the national level and leads the National Coordination Group which acts as a bridge between the political level and the operational implementation of the Strategy. This group supports the High Level National Group in making strategic decisions and facilitates stakeholder participation, bottom-up decision making, networking, partnership building, and discussion on specific projects and initiatives.

In **Croatia**, the national coordination involves establishing networks, aligning policies, and launching initiatives with macro-regional relevance (EUSDR and EUSAIR). An emphasis is put on integrating local and regional stakeholders in the governance of the Strategy to ensure broader participation and effectiveness.

In **Czechia**, the governance structure includes an inter-ministerial coordination group for EU macro-regional strategies, chaired by the NC and consisting of representatives from relevant line ministries (mostly CZ PACs and CZ SG members), funding programmes and other stakeholders, such as the Union of Towns and Municipalities. CZ representatives in the DYC are also invited to regular coordination group meetings.

In **Hungary**, an EUSDR-related working group includes NCs, PACs, SG members, representatives from the Managing Authorities (MAs) as well as from other relevant institutions in Hungary. This structure aims to ensure coherent actions and effective communication among stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Strategy. Additionally, the Hungarian National Coordination involves the participation of civil society and youth through various platforms, such as the DYC and local civil/youth initiatives, to foster inclusive governance and engagement.

In **Montenegro**, a new Directorate for European Territorial Cooperation has been established within the Ministry of European Affairs to enhance, among others, the coordination of the macro-regional strategies (EUSDR and EUSAIR). The NC team continuously works to ensure more active participation from Montenegrin institutions within the EUSDR by gathering the implementers from relevant line ministries. To facilitate effective governance, the Ministry of European Affairs regularly visits municipalities to present the opportunities available through the macro-regional strategies.

In the **Republic of Moldova**, the responsibility of national coordination lies with the Ministry of Infrastructure and Regional Development since 2023. Moldova puts a special emphasis on including more stakeholders in the governance and in EUSDR-related activities.

In **Romania**, the EUSDR Consultative Council plays a significant role in contributing ideas for potential EUSDR-related activities, comprising, among others, representatives from central and local public administration, the business sector, academia and civil society.

In **Serbia**, a consultation group for the EUSDR assists the NC team in facilitating discussions and exchanges among stakeholders. There is a formal involvement of actors from different levels, such as national, regional and local authorities as well as civil society organisations.

**Slovakia** puts an emphasis on the enhancement of participation in the governance from various levels, including MAs, civil society and local authorities. Additionally, Slovakia supported Ukraine during its EUSDR PCY in 2022 and co-hosted the 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, highlighting the importance of mutual support amongst EUSDR members.

In **Slovenia**, the NC team regularly reports to the Government of Slovenia and the National Assembly on the developments in the macro-regional strategies (EUSDR, EUSAIR and EUSALP). This includes providing updates on the progress made by each line ministry and other involved stakeholders. The governance structure includes a consultation group of the EUSDR and the involvement of various stakeholders from different levels, including local and regional actors as well as civil society. Cooperation has been pursued with universities, local governments and regional development centres. Additionally, Slovenia organises the annual Mediterranean Coast and Macro-regional Strategies Week, a stakeholder conference, which includes local and regional authorities, national government representatives, research institutions as well as the business sector.

In **Ukraine**, a coordinating centre for the implementation of activities related to Ukraine's participation in the EUSDR functions as a subsidiary body of the Government of Ukraine. This centre ensures coherent actions by central and local executive authorities regarding the EUSDR. The coordinating centre includes representatives from national and local authorities, academia and civil society. This organisational structure allows for coordination among various stakeholders at different levels, facilitating Ukraine's active participation in the EUSDR despite the challenges posed by Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, no information was provided regarding national platforms.

## 2.2. Monitoring and Evaluation

Since its establishment, the EUSDR has been prioritising the monitoring and reporting of progress and achievements within its thematic Priority Areas. In 2022, the first EUSDR monitoring system, developed by the DSP in close cooperation with EUSDR core stakeholders, was endorsed by the EUSDR NCs. The development of the **EUSDR Monitoring Concept** followed a participatory approach, involving EUSDR core stakeholders' expertise from the beginning on (SG DANUVAL). The Monitoring Concept is a harmonised solution, bringing together reporting strands from the EC and the EUSDR (DSP), including the monitoring of the embedding process<sup>17</sup>, by offering one comprehensive reporting template reflecting the progress and achievements of PAs for all the above-mentioned purposes. This keeps the administrative burden of the PACs at a necessary minimum and yet complies with the need for a comprehensive monitoring in order to establish the basis for decision-making and the support for strategic coordination as well as to keep an overview of the participation and achievements within the EUSDR and to provide targeted stakeholder support.

The EUSDR monitoring tool also directly integrates the questionnaire from the EC to the MRS Thematic Area Coordinators (PACs), which is the basis for the **Reports from the Commission** to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions **on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies**. This modus operandi is unique among the four MRS, highlighting the joint approach and collaborative spirit aiming to provide a joint monitoring via one system, while reducing the administrative efforts as good as possible.

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<sup>17</sup> Paper for Monitoring of Embedding the EUSDR into EU Funds and Funding Programmes 2021-2027. [Online](#).

The EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028, published in September 2023 by the DSP, outlines the evaluation strategy, building on the previous plan (2019-2022). It ensures the Strategy's relevance and high-quality evaluations through proper planning, smooth implementation, and adequate resources.

In May 2022, the final report of the Policy/Impact Evaluation was published, highlighting the successful implementation of the 2020 revised EUSDR Action Plan, supported by a solid and well-functioning governance structure. It emphasises that processes and tools used by the EUSDR support effectively the administrative tasks, crucial for implementing the EUSDR Action Plan 2020.

All EUSDR evaluation activities have been supported and accompanied in the broadest way possible by the **SG DANUVAL**, set up in 2019 and consisting of representatives of the EC/DG REGIO, the EUSDR TRIO PCY and interested NCs, one PAC per EUSDR Pillar, the DRP, the DSP, the DYC as well as optionally other stakeholders such as (external) experts (e.g., ESPON or representatives from other MRS).

### 2.3. EUSDR Embedding

By design, the EU MRS such as the EUSDR do not have their own funding. Successful implementation of the Strategy therefore depends on the one hand directly on its absorption and generation of EU, national, regional and other public and private funds. On the other hand, MRS comprise a variety of complex thematic policy fields, which means that in the implementation process, it is vital to align and streamline EUSDR priorities and to create synergies with other instruments and funding sources in order to secure a sound implementation of the goals set. The described process has been referred to as embedding of MRS into EU funding programmes. In the EUSDR and within the reporting period, the embedding process has been one of the top priorities of the UA and SI EUSDR PCIES. The embedding process, which can also be referred to as funding of implementation, has on the EUSDR side been set-up as a hand in hand process starting from the revision of the EUSDR Action Plan (2020) and the programming phase for 2020+ funding. The continuous efforts of all EUSDR core stakeholder levels, in particular the EUSDR PCIES in 2022-2023, have been core prerequisites for a successful and comprehensive implementation of the EUSDR in the following EU funding period.

In the frame of embedding, the **EUSDR ESF Network**<sup>18</sup> has to be mentioned, which was established following the Meeting of Ministers responsible for the national coordination of EU funds at the margins of the 4<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Ulm, DE, in 2015. The network is organised by PAC 9 "People and Skills" and PAC 10 "Institutional Capacity & Cooperation" together with the ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region and other partners. In this respect, the cooperation capitalises upon an ongoing exchange of experience and mutual learning with the EUSBSR and its ESF MA network, as well as inputs from the EC (DG EMPL). So far, 10 meetings of the network have been held with the participation of the nine EU member states in the Danube Region implementing the ESF. In 2022, the 10<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the ESF Network took place in Vienna, AT. The meeting addressed transnational cooperation in the context of the ESF+, potential synergies with ERDF/CF and IPA/NDICI programmes, the state of play in ESF+ programming and potential topics for cooperation, links to the Interreg DRP, projects supporting Ukraine and possible contributions from the ESF+, and needs and challenges regarding the implementation of transnational cooperation at programme/project level. The network has gradually and systematically gained in maturity, ranging from the discussion of concrete examples/projects and

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<sup>18</sup> EUSDR ESF Network. [Online](#).

challenges and opportunities in the implementation of transnational cooperation within the ESF up to the identification of common topics and, subsequently, the definition of joint text modules related to the EUSDR/transnational cooperation for the national ESF+-programmes.

With the 2022 UA EUSDR PCY, the focus of the **joint embedding efforts shifted to the implementation phase**. Following the EC, the priorities, measures and projects agreed by the (EU) managing/programming authorities as being relevant for the MRS, should be executed in a coordinated and synchronised way across the MRS member states. Against this background, EUSDR stakeholders reaffirmed their will to cooperate and achieve common goals and to implement joint activities. As the financial needs and thematic scope of EUSDR embedding exceed the possibilities of individual programmes, the further embedding process drew on the work of the existing EUSDR managing/programming authorities' networks (ERDF/CF and IPA/NDICI), which already have initiated a dialogue with the key stakeholders of the Strategy, and jointly identified future relevant areas of cooperation, based on surveys conducted in the networks and published in January 2022<sup>19</sup>.

In January 2022, the DSP published the Consolidated Overview of Embedding Surveys of EUSDR managing/programming authorities (ERDF/CF & IPA/NDICI) and NCs<sup>20</sup> which provides the **TOP 5 matchmakings identified as regards the mainstream/national and Interreg priorities and the EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics** (basic numerical count of the coverage of EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics in the national/Interreg programme context). These TOP 5 priorities, which are considered relevant with regard to the alignment of key topics by the managing/programming authorities and the EUSDR objectives, are now to be coordinated in more depth and carried out in a harmonised manner in the further embedding process as described in the UA EUSDR PCY **Guidance Paper for Embedding the EUSDR into EU Programmes (2022)**<sup>21</sup>.

Table 2: TOP 5 topics as identified in the UA EUSDR PCY Guidance Paper 2022

SO	TOP 5 priorities	Priority Area	MA's / Pro-grammes	Countries
1.1	To promote inclusiveness of the European Research Area and crossing innovation gap through capacity building, promoting research excellence and supporting collaboration in EU R&I programmes	PA 7	24	11
	Stimulating the effective preparation and implementation of national and regional Smart Specialisation Strategies			
	To respond to emerging challenges in the Danube Region through research, innovation and strengthening knowledge society			
1.3	Further development of the clusters, clusters and regional development	PA 8	20	11
	Female entrepreneurship			

<sup>19</sup> EUSDR ERDF/CF MA Network Survey, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>20</sup> EUSDR Embedding – Priorities of the MA/programming authorities aligned to the 36 shortlisted strategic topics (as of 10/2020), 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>21</sup> Guidance Paper for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) into EU Programmes, From Actions to Funding, 2022. [Online](#).

2.1	Increase energy efficiency and promote the decarbonisation of the heating and cooling sector	PA 2	25	11
2.4	Climate change	PA 4	35	12
	Supporting the implementation of the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan and sub-basin flood risk management plans in 2021-2027	PA 5		
	Disaster management			
	Climate change adaption			
2.7	Traffic stakeholders/plane routes	PA 1b	28	12
	Endangered umbrella species	PA 6		
	Green infrastructure			
	Soil-related ecosystem services			

Based on the five thematic areas prioritised for EUSDR embedding, dedicated workshops were held in the newly established **EUSDR Embedding Week**<sup>22</sup>. The EUSDR Embedding Week, organised by the DSP, took place for the first time from 11 to 15 July 2022 in an online format. On each day, one thematic workshop brought together EUSDR stakeholders and the programming and managing authorities to facilitate **matchmaking between relevant stakeholders, provide a forum for joint dialogue between programmes and the EUSDR** and to discuss ways on how to embed the EUSDR into the respective programmes. The EUSDR Embedding Week addressed the potential and challenges of embedding from multiple angles, bringing together, among others, speakers representing the UA EUSDR PCY, the European Commission, the Technical Support to the Implementation and Management of ENI CBC programmes (TESIM), funding programmes, MAs, programming authorities and EUSDR NCs and PACs. In line with the results of the matchmaking between the priorities of mainstream/national/Interreg programmes and EUSDR shortlisted strategic topics, resulting in five thematic areas prioritised for EUSDR embedding, topics related to *research & innovation, S3, cluster development, female entrepreneurship, energy efficiency, decarbonisation of heating & cooling systems, climate change, flood & disaster management, endangered umbrella species, green infrastructure and soil-related ecosystem services* were addressed during the sessions. Several best-practice examples of successfully implemented projects were showcased and ideas for future projects and initiatives were discussed. The programmes also displayed the embedding measures that can be used in order to ensure high impact of the financial support in the Region. The EUSDR Embedding Week has highlighted the progress of the EUSDR Embedding process, but also the importance of joint and coordinated next steps, which was summarised in the **EUSDR Embedding Week Review**<sup>23</sup> by the DSP.

<sup>22</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week: A week of successful matchmaking. [Online](#).

<sup>23</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week Review – Edition 2022. [Online](#).

POs / EUSDR (click for details)		Specific Topics	SOs	Date & Time
<a href="#">A smarter Danube Region</a>		#Inclusive European Research Area #Bridging innovation gaps through capacity building #Promoting research excellence #Smart Specialisation Strategies #Research and innovation as crisis response	SO 1.1	July 11 <sup>th</sup> 10:00-12:00 CEST
<a href="#">A more competitive Danube Region</a>		#Cluster development #Female entrepreneurship	SO 1.3	July 12 <sup>th</sup> 10:00-12:00 CEST
<a href="#">A more energy efficient Danube Region</a>		#Energy efficiency #Decarbonisation of heating & cooling systems	SO 2.1	July 13 <sup>th</sup> 10:00-12:00 CEST
<a href="#">A more resilient Danube Region</a>		#Climate change adaptation #Flood and Disaster Management	SO 2.4	July 14 <sup>th</sup> 10:00-12:00 CEST
<a href="#">A greener Danube Region</a>		#Traffic stakeholders/plane routes #Endangered umbrella species #Green infrastructure #Soil-related ecosystem services	SO 2.7	July 15 <sup>th</sup> 10:00-12:00 CEST

Figure 2: Agenda of the EUSDR Embedding Week 2022, organised under the UA EUSDR PCY, facilitated by the DSP

In addition, the **synchronisation of EUSDR priorities (embedding), implementation and evaluation** were one of the priorities defined in the Programme of the UA EUSDR PCY. The UA EUSDR PCY considered this priority as a way to address Danube Region challenges more strategically through coordinated actions and use of synergy effects. In the short and medium term, the main objective has been to increase the efficiency of the use of EU funds and to contribute to deepening the dialogue between the stakeholders involved in the EUSDR embedding process. In the long term, such a process aims to achieve tangible results and contribute to the achievement of economic, social and territorial cohesion in the Danube Region.

For Ukraine, the embedding process has been a particular experience, as the country does not have access to most of the EU funding resources. Therefore, the UA EUSDR PCY highlighted further the **Ukrainian vision of the embedding exercise** and the **good practice experience of aligning the priorities and objectives of the EUSDR with national policy documents**.

With the SI EUSDR PCY in 2023, the embedding process pursued in continuation of the priorities of the previous EUSDR PCIES was taken up and the focus of **the joint embedding efforts on the implementation phase** was intensified. A focus was placed, above all, on **embedding in cross-cooperation between the EUSDR PAs** in the continuation of the EUSDR Embedding Week series. With a focus on such complex and cross-cutting topics, which will remain high on the agenda in the whole Danube Region, the concept of the EUSDR Embedding Weeks highlights the importance of dialogue, exchange and coordination when it comes to the need to align funding across funding sources and creating synergies between different macro-regional stakeholders. The **2<sup>nd</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week**<sup>24</sup>, organised by the DSP, took place from 12 to 16 June 2023. On each day, one thematic workshop brought together, among others, EUSDR stakeholders and the programming and managing authorities, to provide a forum for joint dialogue between programmes and the EUSDR on embedding issues,

<sup>24</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week: Concrete steps from programming to implementation. [Online](#).

moving from the programming to the implementation phase, which was summarised in the **EUSDR Embedding Week Review**<sup>25</sup> by the DSP.

POs / EUSDR		Specific Topics	POs	Date & Time
A more connected Danube Region		# sustainable transport # alternative fuels # energy-efficiency	PO 2 PO 3	12 June 2023 10.00 - 12.00 CET
A smarter Danube Region		# educational activity # water management # environmental protection	PO 2 PO 4	13 June 2023 10.00 - 12.00 CET
A greener Danube Region		# freshwater ecosystems # risk management # restore biodiversity	PO 2	14 June 2023 10.00 - 12.00 CET
A more secure Danube Region		# human trafficking # security enhancement # regional network	PO 5	15 June 2023 10.00 - 12.00 CET
A more social Danube Region		# urban regeneration # local investments # sustainable jobs	PO 4	16 June 2023 10.00 - 12.00 CET

Figure 3: Agenda of the EUSDR Embedding Week 2023, organised under the SI EUSDR PCY, facilitated by the DSP

Furthermore, during the SI EUSDR PCY and under the initiation of the DSP, first steps have been taken regarding the **integration of Horizon Europe EU Missions**<sup>26</sup>, which has been considered advisable by the EC<sup>27</sup>. In a first exchange, EC/DG MARE, implementing the **EU Mission “Restore our Ocean and Waters”**<sup>28</sup> and the thematically relevant EUSDR PA 4 (Water Quality), PA 5 (Environmental Risks) and PA 6 (Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality) in the field of the EU Mission for the restoration of waters, confirmed to deepen the embedding cooperation, and to coordinate possible future initiatives. This cooperation has been expanded to the effect that funding EUSDR topics from these areas will be reflected in the EU missions in the future<sup>29</sup>.

During its EUSDR PCY, SI made significant strides in enhancing the embedding process, with a particular focus on EU accession countries. Drawing on its extensive experience gained from the participation in three different macro-regional strategies, SI successfully fostered cross-strategy knowledge exchange, which enriched the implementation of the EUSDR. In this respect, comprehensive monitoring mechanisms were supported that allowed for continuous evaluation of the embedding process. These mechanisms proved instrumental in ensuring the sustained engagement of relevant stakeholders at all levels – local, regional, national, and transnational. By identifying both the opportunities and challenges of the embedding process, SI enabled EUSDR key implementers to take timely and targeted

<sup>25</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week Review – Edition 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>26</sup> EU Missions in Horizon Europe. [Online](#).

<sup>27</sup> Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies (COM/2022/705 final) and the accompanying Annex (SWD/2022/397 final). [Online](#).

<sup>28</sup> EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters. [Online](#).

<sup>29</sup> Mission Ocean and Water service portal. [Online](#).

actions, ensuring the Strategy's continued relevance and effectiveness. The PCY's efforts have thus laid the groundwork for further advancing the embedding process, providing a solid foundation for future initiatives and fostering closer collaboration across the Region.

In addition, all four MRS cooperate on embedding MRS into respective funds and programmes. Cross-MRS discussion on embedding took place, among others, in meetings of the High-Level Group (HLG), meetings of the TRIO PCIES of MRS and the EC, during the EU MRS Week or in meetings organised by INTERACT. The SI EUSDR PCY organised a discussion at the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, where a **high-level panel of EU accession country representatives** discussed strategic planning and budgeting in terms of funding through and beyond IPA III/NDICI in the Danube Region.

During the reporting period, the DSP together with the EUSDR PCIES, continued to organise the **EUSDR managing/programming authorities (ERDF/CF and IPA/NDICI) network meetings** in a joint manner, to update and exchange about ideas, develop joint activities, and enhance the efficiency and impact of programme-Strategy cooperation in the field of embedding. The network serves as a platform to demonstrate what the Strategy can offer to the programmes in terms of embedding, for sharing experiences, addressing challenges, managing expectations, finding joint solutions, spreading success stories, and promoting best practices. Since the exchange is a two-way process, also the programmes have the opportunity to express their expectations, needs, ideas and proposals to the Strategy when it comes to embedding the Danube Region Strategy's priorities into the programmes in a more efficient and targeted way. The meetings organised also function as a sort of a think-tank, analysing and promoting project outcomes, and advocating for the importance of external cooperation and EU enlargement. By fostering collaboration across programmes and the EUSDR, the network can encourage joint initiatives.

In 2023, the Interreg DRP jointly developed together with EUSDR core stakeholders and with support of the DSP, the **scheme for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Seed Money Facility (SMF) Call**. In several questionnaire-based discussion rounds between the DRP and the EUSDR PACs, it was worked out that the thematic focus is set by EUSDR PAs and that the call is run and implemented by the Programme. In addition, the framework of the 2<sup>nd</sup> SMF Call foresees a joint promotion and DRP-EUSDR co-assessment of proposals. The co-assessment of proposals will be structured in a two-step procedure, where the Interreg DRP evaluates the relevance and thematic fit to one or more PAs with a threshold of at least 60%. Whereas the PAs will be responsible for a strategic assessment along 10 guiding questions (transnationality, workplan, partnership, target groups, value for money). The total budget foreseen is roughly EUR 3,3 million (EUR 2,7 million Interreg funds).

## 2.4. Danube Strategy Flagships (Strategic Projects and Processes)

Danube Strategy Flagships are projects and/or processes that contribute to the implementation of the EUSDR, have a clear macro-regional dimension and a multi-level governance approach. They contribute to economic, social and territorial cohesion and improve the quality of life in the Danube Region.

The **Guidance Paper** for identifying and listing Danube Strategy Flagships<sup>30</sup>, was prepared by the DSP in consultation<sup>30</sup> with the PACs and endorsed by the NCs in 2022. It includes the definition, purpose and criteria for Danube Strategy Flagships.



Figure 4: Danube Strategy Flagship logo

In 2022, the PACs, together with their SGs, identified, for the first time, a minimum of one and a maximum of three Danube Strategy Flagships within their PAs. Following the PA's submissions, the DSP compiled the full **list of Danube Strategy Flagships 2022**<sup>31</sup>, distributed them among the PACs, NCs and other EUSDR core stakeholders and took care of proper dissemination and promotion as outlined in the Guidance Paper. In 2023, several new Danube Strategy Flagships were added and some Danube Strategy Flagships from 2022 were updated regarding their implementation status<sup>32</sup>.

Table 3: List of Danube Strategy Flagship, 2022 and 2023

Danube Strategy Flagship Title	EUSDR PA(s)	Year(s)
Joint PA 1a & PA 11 Working Group on Administrative Processes	PA 1a, PA 11	2022, 2023
Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan for the Danube and its navigable tributaries	PA 1a	2022, 2023
Danube Region Transport Days (DRTD)	PA 1b	2022, 2023
Danube Region Multimodal Corridors	PA 1b	2022, 2023
SUSTANCE – Sustainable public transport solutions and innovative governance schemes for improving connectivity in Central Europe	PA 1b	2022, 2023
Enhancing hydrogen economy in the EUSDR	PA 2	2022, 2023
Promote local low-carbon energy actions in the EUSDR	PA 2	2022, 2023
Diversification of gas supply in EUSDR	PA 2	2022, 2023
Friends of the DANUBE Camps	PA 3	2023
Sustain and better connect EUSDR Cultural routes	PA 3	2022, 2023
Danube Small Project Fund	PA 3	2022, 2023
Flagship process on adaptation to climate change	PA 4	2022, 2023
Flagship process on migratory fish	PA 4	2022, 2023
Flagship process on emerging substances	PA 4	2022, 2023
Disaster Management Working Group	PA 5	2022, 2023
Nature-based solutions for flood risk reduction	PA 5	2022, 2023
Improving the Safety of Tailings Management Facilities in the Danube River Basin	PA 5	2022, 2023
Priority Area 6 Task Forces – Stakeholder Involvement, multi-level governance, joint implementation	PA 6	2022, 2023
Sustainable Smart Specialisation for the Re-Opening of Industrial Sites in the Danube Region (RIS4Danu)	PA 7	2023
Excellence in research, social and technological innovation project management (Excellence-in-ReSTI)	PA 7, PA 9, PA 10	2023

<sup>30</sup> Guidance Paper for identifying and listing Danube Strategy Flagships, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>31</sup> List of Danube Strategy Flagships, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>32</sup> List of Danube Strategy Flagships, 2023. [Online](#).

Danube Strategy Flagship Title	EUSDR PA(s)	Year(s)
<b>Danube Tech Valley Initiative</b>	PA 7, PA 8, PA 9, PA 10	2022
<b>Multilateral Scientific and Technological Cooperation</b>	PA 7	2022
<b>Western Balkans R&amp;I Information Hub</b>	PA 7, PA 8, PA 10	2022
<b>Danube Transfer Center Network – DTC Network</b>	PA 8	2023
<b>BRinging Artificial Intelligence towards SMEs (BrAIIn)</b>	PA 8	2023
<b>Danube Alliance for SME Competitiveness</b>	PA 8	2022
<b>Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)</b>	PA 9	2023
<b>Bringing the Danube Region into Classrooms: Promoting Cooperation of Schools and Teachers</b>	PA 9	2023
<b>Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence</b>	PA 9	2022
<b>European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training National Reference Points</b>	PA 9	2022
<b>ESF Managing Authorities Network in the Danube Region</b>	PA 9, PA 10	2022
<b>Danube Youth Network</b>	PA 10	2023
<b>Cross-border Emergency Healthcare</b>	PA 10	2023
<b>EuroAccess Macro-Regions</b>	PA 10	2022
<b>(Danube) Participation Day</b>	PA 10	2022, 2023
<b>Collaboration for Dismantling Drugs Distribution and Illicit Laboratories (CO3DIL)</b>	PA 11	2022, 2023

In connection with the Danube Strategy Flagships, the EUSDR PACs point out that, through the Flagships’ communication approach to support policy development and facilitating transnational cooperation, the EUSDR enables countries in the Danube Region to collectively address significant frameworks, opportunities and challenges like the European Green Deal, digital transformation, and social inclusion, while also responding to dynamic external factors such as the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and climate change impacts.

To promote the Danube Strategy Flagships, 13 videos were produced (see chapter 2.5 for more details). In addition, EUSDR PAs promoted the Danube Strategy Flagships via various channels such as the Priority Area websites, social media channels and newsletters (PA 10)<sup>33</sup> or dedicated Certificate Ceremonies (PA 8)<sup>34</sup> with Danube Strategy Flagship projects.

<sup>33</sup> EUSDR PA 10 Danube Strategy Flagship promotion. [Online](#).

<sup>34</sup> EUSDR PA 8 Danube Strategy Flagship promotion. [Online](#).

## 2.5. Communication Activities

The **EUSDR Communication Strategy**<sup>35</sup> and the **EUSDR Communication Guide**<sup>36</sup> help to increase the visibility of the EUSDR and improve internal and external communication, demonstrating the impact of the Strategy and its implementation in concrete terms<sup>37</sup>. All communication activities were developed and implemented in line with the EUSDR vision statement “Together we build a prosperous region with a healthy environment, equal societies and high living standards” and the slogan “Danube Region Strategy – Prosperity through Diversity”.

The **EUSDR Brand Book**<sup>38</sup>, created in August 2023, serves as a guide to ensure consistent use of the EUSDR visual identity. It provides clear instructions and guidelines on correctly applying logos, colours, fonts, and other branding elements across different platforms and materials. The Brand Book aims to maintain a unified and recognisable brand image, helping EUSDR stakeholders and partners to use the visual identity.

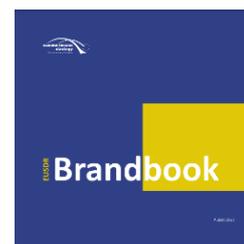


Figure 5: EUSDR  
Brandbook

During 2022 and 2023, the communication activities were developed considering the following key documents:

- Conclusions of the 4<sup>th</sup> Report from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies<sup>39</sup> (2022),
- Council Conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies<sup>40</sup> (2023),
- Conclusions and recommendations of the “Policy/Impact evaluation of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region (2022)”<sup>41</sup>, commissioned by DSP and elaborated by Spatial Foresight, and
- Conclusions of the Flash Eurobarometer 497/2021 on “Citizens’ awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy”<sup>42</sup>.

All activities targeting external audiences aimed to increase the visibility of the EUSDR, its cooperation opportunities as well as to contribute to better stakeholder engagement. Concrete communication objectives, tools, channels and targets were defined in the **EUSDR Communication Plans for 2022 and 2023** in consultation with the EUSDR core stakeholders. The activities supported and promoted the

<sup>35</sup> EUSDR Communication Strategy. [Online](#).

<sup>36</sup> EUSDR Communication Guide. [Online](#).

<sup>37</sup> The Communication Strategy defines the mission, vision, objectives, target audiences, channels, tools and key messages, while the Communication Guide includes a clear narrative and detailed guidance and actionable steps to ensure that key messages are communicated efficiently.

<sup>38</sup> EUSDR Brand Book. [Online](#).

<sup>39</sup> Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies (COM/2022/705 final) and the accompanying Annex (SWD/2022/397 final). [Online](#).

<sup>40</sup> Council conclusions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies (13424/20); (3), i): *increase the visibility of the results achieved by the MRS through strategic communication*. [Online](#).

<sup>41</sup> Policy/impact evaluation of EUSDR instruments, tools and activities for measuring the impact in the Danube Region, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>42</sup> Flash Eurobarometer 497/2021. “Citizens’ awareness and perception of EU regional policy”. Report. [Online](#). The Flash Eurobarometer no. 497/2021 on Citizens’ awareness and perceptions of EU regional policy, evaluates quantitatively also the situation of MRS’s awareness degree among the respondents who answered to the following question: Are you aware that there is an EU strategy to promote cooperation between countries in the following areas? Closed answers were available: Yes, I am aware about the Danube River area strategy / No, I am not aware about the Danube river area strategy. Asked about the awareness of an EU strategy to promote cooperation between countries in specific areas, 8% of the respondents have heard about EUSDR. Focusing on the Member States covered by this MRS, the proportion saying they are aware of this Strategy to promote cooperation between their countries ranges from 8% in Germany to 32% in Hungary. As shown in the report, the countries with higher levels of awareness on at least one MRS are those countries directly involved in one or more of the macro-regional strategies, such as Slovenia (17%), which is involved in 3 MRS – EUSDR, EUSAIR and EUSALP.

priorities set by the UA and SI EUSDR PCIES, and the communication initiatives established by the PACs and the DSP.

The EUSDR PACs, NCs, and the DSP disseminate valuable information about the ongoing EUSDR implementation, relevant events, annual Danube Strategy Flagships, stakeholder meetings, the EUSDR Annual Fora, studies, documents and policy recommendations, the incumbent EUSDR PCY's activities, cross-promotional opportunities with other MRS, and EU funding opportunities, and many more, through various channels. The promoted information was spread across online tools, digital and printed publications, events, and other media channels.

The EUSDR Communication Plans for 2022 and 2023 introduced new activities supporting the highest possible promotion of the **European Year of Youth**<sup>43</sup> and **Danube Strategy Flagships**<sup>44</sup>, providing a wide range of communication channels within the EUSDR community and beyond.

The **EUSDR social media channels** are the key tools for reaching and engaging larger online communities. The DSP manages the main EUSDR channels (Facebook<sup>45</sup>, LinkedIn<sup>46</sup>, X<sup>47</sup>, Instagram<sup>48</sup> and YouTube<sup>49</sup>) making it the main window of the EUSDR to the online world, targeting several stakeholder groups and a wider public.

EUSDR **PA 3**<sup>50</sup>, **PA 7**<sup>51</sup>, **PA 9**<sup>52</sup> and **PA 10**<sup>53</sup> also manage social media channels related to their specific activities. The DYC members working with **PA 7** promoted their activities via Facebook and Instagram accounts. To reach a wider audience, PA 7 has started to use **online streaming** via their Facebook channel. The first two live streams took place on 26 May 2022<sup>54</sup> and 10 November 2023<sup>55</sup> and involved scientists from the Danube Region to promote their work relevant to the Region. EUSDR **PA 9** enhanced the visibility of their activities via their Facebook channel, counting 700 followers, while **PA 10** uses its social media channels to keep a broad audience (over 1 000 followers on Facebook, X and YouTube) by sharing updates on the latest news and initiatives.

A new EUSDR channel was launched by the DSP in August 2022 on Instagram, attracting 179 followers by the end of that year, and growing to 310 followers by the end of 2023. The Instagram account targets foremost young people. The goal is to raise awareness and engage younger generations, making EUSDR activities more accessible and appealing to younger age groups.

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<sup>43</sup> European Youth Portal. [Online.](#)

<sup>44</sup> Danube Strategy Flagships. [Online.](#)

<sup>45</sup> EUSDR Facebook channel. [Online.](#)

<sup>46</sup> EUSDR LinkedIn channel. [Online.](#)

<sup>47</sup> EUSDR X channel. [Online.](#)

<sup>48</sup> EUSDR Instagram channel. [Online.](#)

<sup>49</sup> Danube Region Strategy YouTube channel. [Online.](#)

<sup>50</sup> EUSDR Culture Tourism Facebook channel [Online](#), PA3-EUSDR (irina cozma) culture, tourism, people to people contacts LinkedIn channel [Online.](#)

<sup>51</sup> Danube Knowledge Society Instagram channel [Online](#), Danube Region Strategy: Knowledge Society Facebook channel [Online.](#)

<sup>52</sup> People and Skills in the Danube Region Facebook channel. [Online.](#)

<sup>53</sup> PA 10 "Institutional Capacity" of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region Facebook channel [Online](#), Danube Strategy PA 10 Capacity & Cooperation X channel [Online](#), PA10 EUSDR YouTube channel [Online.](#)

<sup>54</sup> Role of the Danube Region countries in space exploration via Facebook. [Online.](#)

<sup>55</sup> Online stream with Dr. Peter Malík – hydrogeologist, via Facebook. [Online.](#)

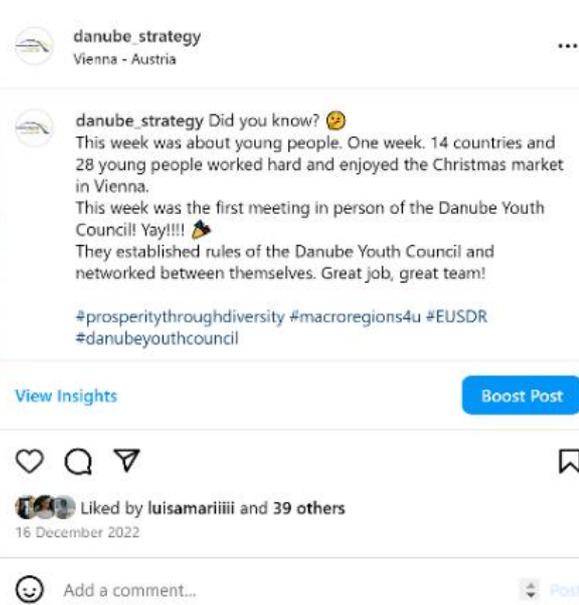


Figure 6: Post about the NYC on the EUSDR Instagram page

The EUSDR social media platforms were key in promoting the call for applications to the NYC (for more information on the NYC, see chapter 2.7). To maximise visibility, information about the NYC and the roles of its members was widely disseminated through social media posts and articles.



Figure 7: Post about the NYC on the EUSDR Instagram page

From 15 May to 24 July 2022, an **online media campaign** was carried out by DSP, aiming to promote the selected Danube Strategy Flagships. It emphasised their relevance for the EUSDR and the benefits brought by the implementation of the EUSDR in the Region. The visuals (videos, banners) used in the campaign were linked to the EUSDR website and/or the Facebook page, helping to create traffic towards the Strategy website and the respective Facebook channel. During the online media campaign, the EUSDR main website attracted significantly more new users from video and banner interactions, compared to the same period in 2021 when no campaign was conducted (see figures 14-17).

The online media campaign for the EUSDR was highly successful, leveraging a combination of Google Display Ads, Facebook Ads, and European web portals. The campaign effectively reached a large,

diverse audience across Europe through 36 news-focused and 81 general-interest web portals, as well as prominent platforms like “Euronews” and “Politico”. This successful campaign significantly boosted visibility and engagement, raising more awareness of the EUSDR across the Danube Region and whole Europe.

The key results of this campaign include:

- News-focused Google Ads: 376 345 video views (the number of times a video was run), 18 170 clicks, and 896 388 unique people who watched the video. The banners received 6,2 million impressions, 86 532 clicks, and over 4 million unique people who watched the banners.
- General Google Ads: 6 million impressions, 74 446 clicks, and a reach of 4,36 million unique people who saw the banners.
- Facebook Ads: 845 768 impressions, 50 284 clicks, and a reach of 481 939 unique people who watched the videos.
- European web portals<sup>56</sup> ( : 3,6 million impressions, 7 740 clicks, and 2,13 million unique people who watched the banners.

Social media platforms were also used to promote the Danube Strategy Flagships 2022. Between 5 October and 22 December 2022, **individual Danube Strategy Flagships were highlighted** each week for twelve weeks across the main EUSDR social media channels, focusing on each of the EUSDR Priority Areas. The campaign was connected with the “#danubestrategyflagships” to provide coherence and connect the single Danube Strategy Flagships better. With 27 Danube Strategy Flagships in total, a **second online campaign** ran from 7 March to 6 June 2023, posting over 550 updates across Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and X. These campaigns significantly boosted follower counts, leading to 7524 followers on Facebook, 3051 on LinkedIn, 1395 on X, 310 on Instagram, and 76 YouTube subscribers by the end of 2023.

The **EUSDR website** together with the **PA websites** acts as a main information hub for both internal and external audiences. New sub-pages have been added to the main EUSDR website, reflecting the latest topics relevant to the implementation of the Danube Region Strategy: Danube Strategy Flagships<sup>57</sup>, Danube Youth Council<sup>58</sup>, the EUSDR Presidency<sup>59</sup>.

The **SI EUSDR PCY** introduced a **new approach to enhance EUSDR communication** by including a recommendation on boosting visibility in its guidelines for “Empowering countries and regions for stronger involvement in the EUSDR”<sup>60</sup>. It is suggested that each EUSDR PCY, in collaboration with the PAs and the DSP, selects successful projects/initiatives implemented within the EUSDR to highlight as impact stories. Based on this, in 2022, the SI EUSDR PCY and the DSP set the grounds for the promotion of successful projects/initiatives implemented within the EUSDR using impact stories to reflect the importance of reaching EUSDR targets. These stories were promoted across various media platforms, encouraging wider stakeholder participation and expanding outreach for greater visibility throughout the EUSDR PCY’s cycle. The first series of nine EUSDR impact stories<sup>61</sup> was elaborated by the SI EUSDR PCY and disseminated by the DSP on the EUSDR website and social media channels targeting a broad

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<sup>56</sup> European web portals: Euronews. [Online](#); Politico. [Online](#); Euractiv. [Online](#); Voxeurope. [Online](#); Eureporter. [Online](#).

<sup>57</sup> Danube Strategy Flagships. [Online](#).

<sup>58</sup> Danube Youth Council. [Online](#).

<sup>59</sup> The EUSDR Presidency. [Online](#).

<sup>60</sup> Slovenian Presidency of the EUSDR 2022–2023, page 20. [Online](#).

<sup>61</sup> Danube Impact Stories – 2023. [Online](#).

audience. This campaign has provided EUSDR PCIES with an effective tool to enhance national visibility and support the implementation and recognition of EUSDR initiatives.

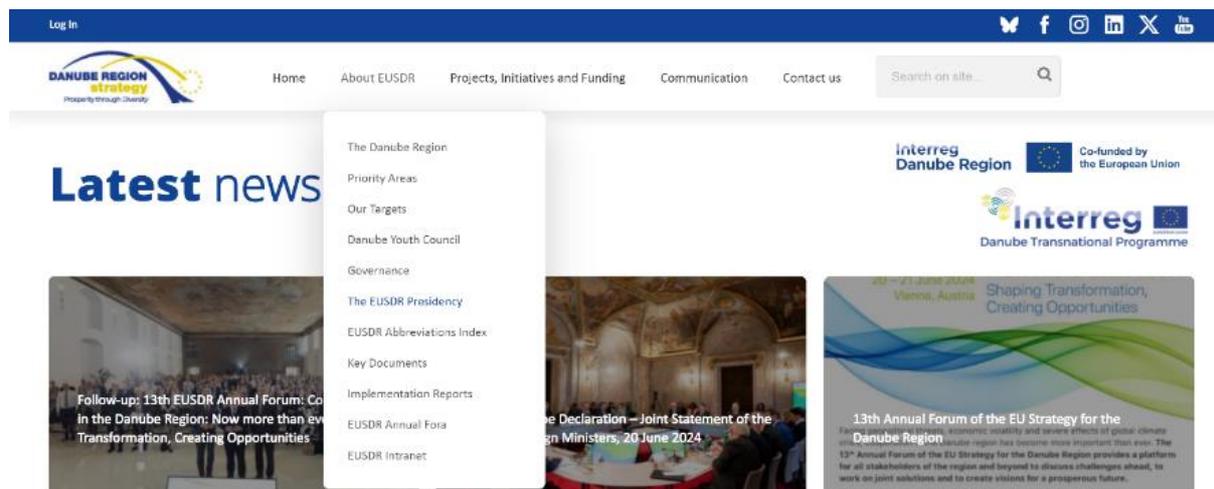


Figure 8: New sub-pages on the EUSDR website

The **Danube Strategy Flagships** sub-page features a brief description of the respective strategic projects/processes, links to the Guidance Paper for their identification and listing and provides a certificate template for selected Danube Strategy Flagships. Following joint efforts by the PAs, the respective SGs and the DSP, the List of Danube Strategy Flagships 2022 was published in September 2022 on the EUSDR website. The Danube Strategy Flagships have their own branding as set in the EUSDR Brand Book.

An updated list of Danube Strategy Flagships was published on the website in 2023. From the updated list, 13 of the Danube Strategy Flagships were illustrated through individual **videos**, produced by the DSP and published also on the EUSDR website<sup>62</sup>. The videos highlight both the challenges in the Danube Region and the solutions presented through the featured Danube Strategy Flagships, accompanied by testimonials from beneficiaries and representatives of the PAs. By strategically utilising the information and insights from the videos, stakeholders can effectively capitalise on the potential of the Danube Strategy Flagships (for more information on capitalisation activities, see chapter 4.2).

Information about the NYC has also been published on the **Danube Youth Council** sub-page on the EUSDR main website, targeting young people interested in contributing to the NYC and staying informed about its activities as well as to other audiences keen to learn how the EUSDR implements the involvement of the youth.

The EUSDR Embedding Weeks (1<sup>st</sup> edition – 11-15 July 2022 and 2<sup>nd</sup> edition – 12-15 June 2023), organised online by the DSP together with the respective EUSDR PCIES, were also promoted on the website, and also via **two e-brochures**: “EUSDR Embedding Week Review – Edition 2022”<sup>63</sup> and “2<sup>nd</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week. A review – Edition 2023”<sup>64</sup>, which summarise the outcomes, discussions and findings including links and information for further reading.

<sup>62</sup> Danube Strategy Flagships (2023). [Online](#).

<sup>63</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week Review – Edition 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>64</sup> 2nd EUSDR Embedding Week. A review – Edition 2023. [Online](#).



Figure 9: 1<sup>st</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week Review 2022

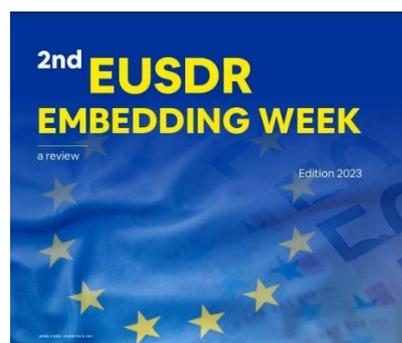


Figure 10: 2<sup>nd</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week Review 2023

The **EUSDR Presidency** sub-page, a service created during the SI EUSDR PCY 2022 by the DSP and subsequently enlarged to all the previous EUSDR PCIES, offers an in-depth overview of the agenda, implementation, events and achievements of each EUSDR chair. This page not only showcases the strategic, political and thematic foci of each EUSDR PCY but also provides a compact overview of every EUSDR chair. It includes essential information such as programmes, priorities, calendars, meetings, and Ministerial joint statements, along with details on the organisation of the EUSDR Annual Fora, etc.

To provide information on funding opportunities in the Region and update the PAs and SGs with current open calls, the EuroAccess newsletters were disseminated in tailor-shaped newsletter emails to the PAs for further dissemination among their stakeholder groups. The service is open to all interested EUSDR stakeholders as well as potential project implementers who can register<sup>65</sup> to receive regular information about the latest calls with the EuroAccess newsletter.



Figure 11: EuroAccess logo

The **Latest news** page was the most updated section of the website, including 34 articles during the reporting period, related to stakeholder events, the UA and SI EUSDR PCIES, studies, reports and documents relevant to the EUSDR Action Plan, open calls for funding, strategic projects, etc.



Figure 12: EUSDR Online Media Campaign, 2022

The impact of the online campaign carried out in 2022 is reflected in the increased number of new users of the EUSDR website. As the graphics below illustrate, their number is higher in the period when the online media campaign was running as compared to the same period in the previous year, when no online media camping was carried out (15 May to 29 June 2021 and 30 June to 24 July 2021) versus a timeframe with the campaign was running (15 May to 9 June 2022 and 30 June to 24 July 2022). The

<sup>65</sup> EuroAccess. [Online](#).

user statistics illustrate how a campaign can boost awareness and visibility of the EUSDR among external audiences while expanding the website’s reach.

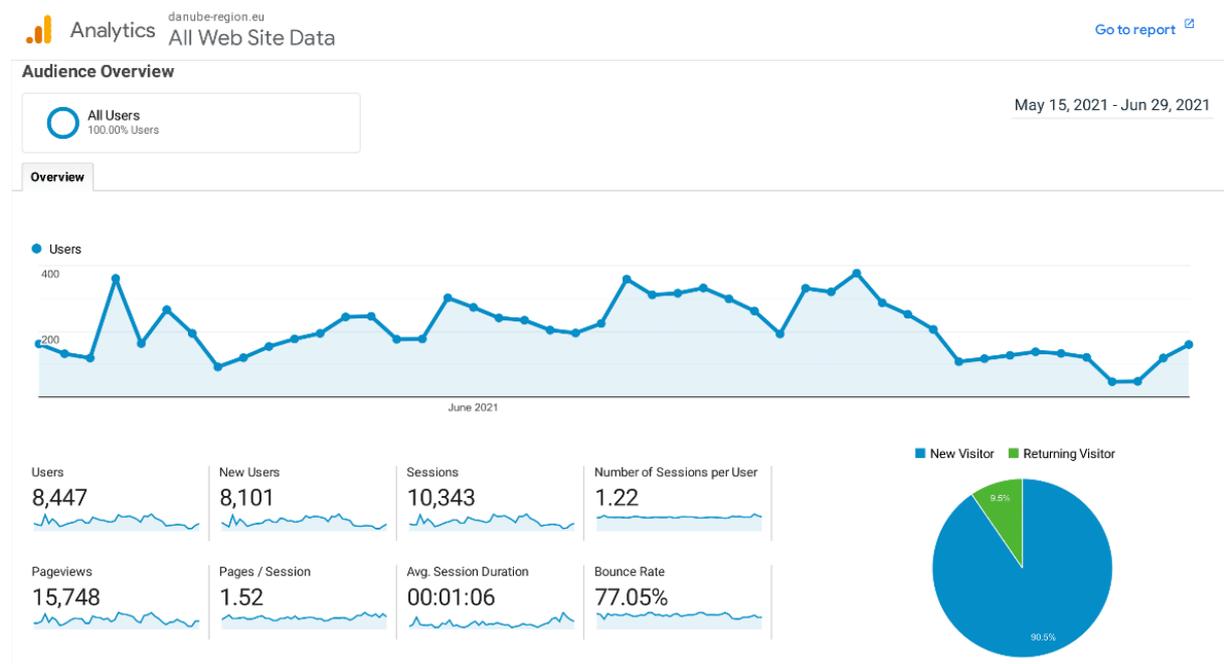


Figure 13: EUSDR Website Audience Overview, 15 May 2021 - 29 June 2021

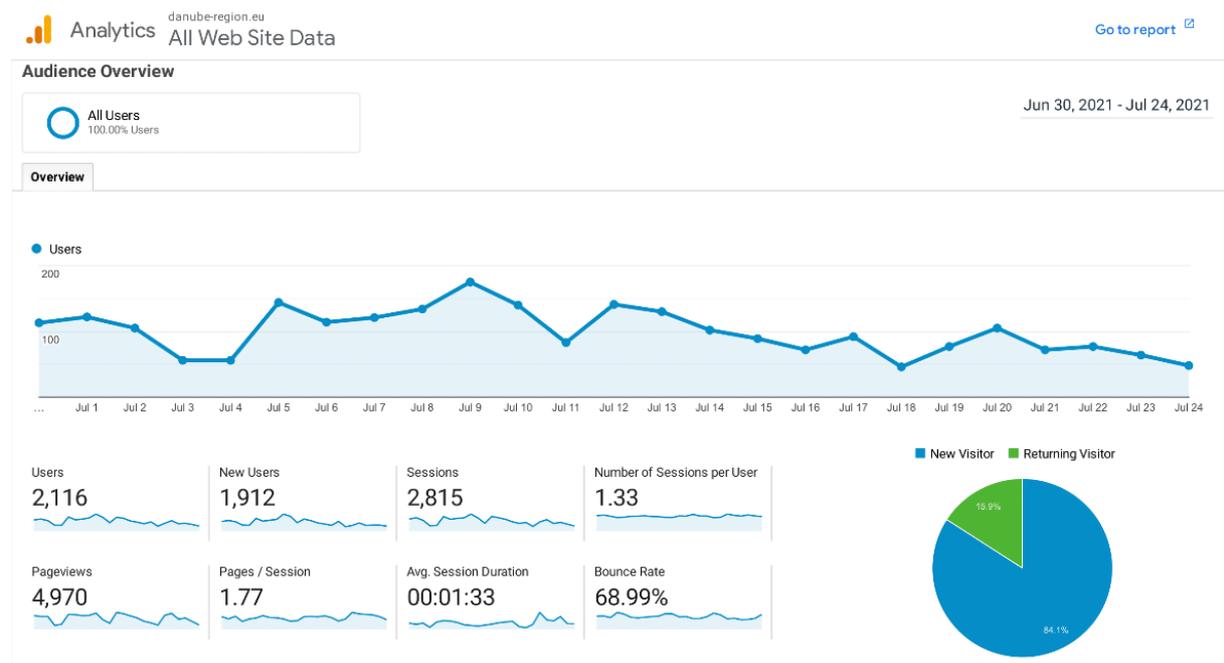


Figure 14: EUSDR Website Audience Overview, 30 June 2021 - 24 July 2021

Audience Overview

May 15, 2022 - Jun 29, 2022

All Users 100.00% Users

Overview

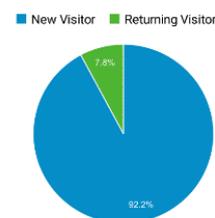


Figure 15: EUSDR Website Audience Overview, 15 May 2022 - 19 June 2022

Audience Overview

Jun 30, 2022 - Jul 24, 2022

All Users 100.00% Users

Overview

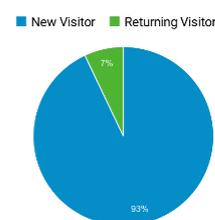


Figure 16: EUSDR Website Audience Overview, 30 June 2022 - 24 July 2022

A new page dedicated to young people from the Danube Region was created within **the EUSDR smart app – Danube for Youth**, providing information about the DYC, internships, scholarships for students and graduates, etc.

The **PA websites** show the implementation of the EUSDR Action Plan, presenting a range of stakeholder and expert meetings, results of the working groups, projects, strategic and political documents, thematic research studies and reports etc. Here, the communication activities by the respective PAs are customised to align with the interests of various target groups, ensuring maximum

outreach and effective delivery of key messages. For example, the **PA 2** website hosts DESTINE<sup>66</sup>, a technical topic-focused sub-page on sustainable energy that offers in-depth information on key topics and provides interactive web-map functionalities. With 41 articles published in 2022 and 2023, the website of **PA 5**<sup>67</sup> showcased the latest initiatives, while the **PA 8** website developed a sub-page dedicated to the **DYC** members<sup>68</sup>, where their interests and activities within the PA are disseminated. **PA 9** published a booklet “**Ten Years of Investing in People and Skills in the Danube Region**”<sup>69</sup> on the EUSDR website as well as two videos, providing a visually attractive illustration of PA 9 and its actions. Furthermore, an online database with the results of the Danube Region Monitor<sup>70</sup> is accessible via the PA 9 website.

The **11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum**, held in Košice, SK, and online (hybrid format) on 19-20 October 2022 was attended by 209 on-site participants and 290 registered online participants. The event was featured on social media (18 posts on Facebook, LinkedIn and X), while 11 journalists from most participating countries present at the event reflected the EUSDR and its activities in 43 pieces of coverage (41 online articles and two YouTube fragments). A summary report<sup>71</sup> of the event was elaborated by the DSP and published on the EUSDR website, in the sub-page dedicated to the EUSDR Annual Fora.



Figure 17: Promotion of the 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Košice, SK, organised under the UA EUSDR PCY



Figure 18: Promotion of the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Brdo pri Kranju, SI, organised under the SI EUSDR PCY

The **12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum** took place in Brdo pri Kranju, SI, and online (hybrid format), on 24 and 25 October 2023, attracting approximately 350 participants on-site. The Forum garnered significant attention in international media, with 47 articles published on widely recognised national platforms, thanks to the presence of journalists supported by the Communication Unit in EC/DG REGIO. The event was prominently featured on social media, specifically on the EUSDR platforms overseen by the DSP, including Facebook, LinkedIn, X, and Instagram (21 posts in total). As a follow-up, the DSP published a summary report<sup>72</sup> of the event, which was also disseminated in an external EUSDR newsletter as well as via email to EUSDR core stakeholders.

<sup>66</sup> DESTINE. [Online](#).

<sup>67</sup> Main news. [Online](#).

<sup>68</sup> Competitiveness. Danube Youth Council. [Online](#).

<sup>69</sup> Ten Years of Investing in People and Skills in the Danube Region, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>70</sup> Danube Region Monitor. [Online](#).

<sup>71</sup> 11th EUSDR Annual Forum. Report. [Online](#).

<sup>72</sup> 12th EUSDR Annual Forum. Report. [Online](#).

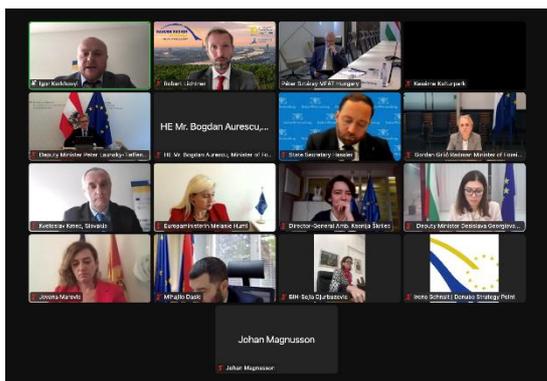


Figure 19: Ministerial Meeting, 2022



Figure 20: Ministerial Meeting, 2023

Several events organised under the MRS framework were highlighted and promoted through the EUSDR website calendar and presentations during the SG Meetings. These events served as platforms for cross-MRS exchange, facilitating collaboration and increasing awareness of regional challenges by engaging core stakeholders from diverse regions. The workshops organised by PAs during the 3<sup>rd</sup> EU MRS Week (7–11 March 2022) and the first joint EUSBSR and EUSDR “Coffee with the Presidency” event<sup>73</sup> (23 May 2022) are examples of such promotion events.

In 2023, the SI EUSDR PCY continued the format “Chat with the Presidency”<sup>74</sup> (31 May 2023, online) which was designed as an offer from the EUSDR PCY to all EUSDR core stakeholders to enable informal exchange and discussions on current topics and activities.

The following **thematic events, workshops and meetings**, were organised and/or attended by EUSDR PAs in 2022-2023 and promoted through various communication channels, in support of the DSP:

- Thematic session within the EU MRS Week 2022 “Smart Villages | Smart Solutions for Innovative Rural Communities in Macro-Regions”<sup>75</sup>, organised by EUSDR PA 10, EUSALP Action Group 5 and EUSBSR PA Innovation, 10 March 2022, Brussels, BE.
- Thematic session within the EU MRS Week 2023 “Development of resilient value chains and their impact on a sustainable energy supply and its energy saving potentials with examples from the fields of circular economy and bioeconomy”<sup>76</sup>, organised by EUSDR PA 8, 26 April 2023, Brussels, BE.
- Thematic session “Skills for the Future of European Macro-Regions” within the European Week of Regions and Cities 2023, organised by PA 9 together with the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg (Germany) and Norden Association Sweden, October 2023, Brussels, BE.
- Thematic session within the EU MRS Week 2023 “How to accelerate natural gas phase out in Europe – first hand experiences and strategies from EU MRS”<sup>77</sup>, organised by EUSDR PA 2, 24 April 2023, Brussels, BE.
- Thematic conference under the SI EUSDR PCY “Conference on Knowledge-Driven Society and Professions of the Future”<sup>78</sup>, shared on EUSDR website, social media channels and EUSDR PA 7 website, 17-18 May 2023, Brdo pri Kranju, SI.

<sup>73</sup> Coffee with the Presidency meetings are becoming a platform for cross-MRS cooperation. [Online](#).

<sup>74</sup> Chat with the Presidency. [Online](#).

<sup>75</sup> Smart Villages | Smart Solutions for Innovative Rural Communities in Macro-Regions. [Online 1](#), [Online 2](#).

<sup>76</sup> Development of resilient value chains and their impact on a sustainable energy supply and its energy saving potentials with examples from the fields of circular economy and bioeconomy. [Online 1](#), [Online 2](#).

<sup>77</sup> How to accelerate natural gas phase out in Europe – first hand experiences and strategies from EU MRS. [Online 1](#), [Online 2](#).

<sup>78</sup> Conference: Towards knowledge-driven society and professions of the future. [Online](#).

- Event “8<sup>th</sup> Danube Salon”, organised by EUSDR NC team DE/BW and attended by EUSDR PAC 8 DE/BW, 8 March 2023, Berlin, DE.
- Conference “The Danube Region at the Turn of Times”<sup>79</sup>, organised by EUSDR PA 8, 10 July 2023, Ulm and Neu-Ulm, DE.
- Stakeholder Conference “Young People in Times of Crisis: Building Responsive Education, Training and Labour Market Systems in the Danube Region”<sup>80</sup> organised by EUSDR PA 9, 9 June 2022, Vienna, AT.
- Stakeholder Conference “A More Resilient, Safer and Smarter Danube Region at Challenging Times” organised by EUSDR PA9, 13-14 November 2023, online.
- Extended Steering Group Meeting (in order to address actions in more detail and elaborate measures with the SG members, experts and project partners), organised by EUSDR PA 10, 28 February 2023, online.



Figure 21: Anja Filipović, DYC member (left), Petra Česen Čatar, Slovenian NC (right) at the Knowledge Driven Society Conference, 2023



Figure 22: The Danube Region at the turn of times conference, 2023 (© PA 8)

In addition, the opening event<sup>81</sup> for the SI EUSDR PCY held on 1-2 December 2022 in Brdo pri Kranju, SI, set the stage for SI’s year of chairing the EUSDR PCY and was promoted via the EUSDR communication channels. It provided an essential basis not only for introducing SI PCY’s thematic and political priorities, but also for presenting a clear roadmap for participants and stakeholders and

<sup>79</sup> Conference: The Danube Region at the Turn of Times. [Online](#).

<sup>80</sup> Young People in Times of Crisis: Building Responsive Education, Training and Labour Market Systems in the Danube Region. [Online](#).

<sup>81</sup> Successful Opening event of the Slovenian Presidency of the EUSDR. [Online](#).

underscoring the PCY's focus on enhancing communication, empowering stakeholders, and unlocking macro-regional cooperation.

The UA and SI EUSDR PCIES, EUSDR PAs and DSP prepared several publications, namely:

- The e-brochure “EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Stories that make us”<sup>82</sup>, issued online in October 2021, was highly appreciated by the external target groups. Consequently, in 2022, the printed version was released in 2 000 copies that were distributed among the NCs and the participants of various EUSDR events.
- EUSDR **PA 2** printed the “Gas phase out” flyer<sup>83</sup> to ensure the widest possible visibility of the project results, and disseminated it at meetings, workshops, seminars and various events organised or supported by PA 2.
- In 2022, EUSDR **PA 4** produced and disseminated a “Water Success Stories 2020-2022” brochure<sup>84</sup> to raise awareness on climate change, migratory fish, and emerging substances.
- EUSDR **PA 7**<sup>85</sup> and **PA 8**<sup>86</sup> published and shared online digital leaflets detailing their activities, projects, and capitalisation efforts.
- For the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, the **SI EUSDR PCY** published and disseminated online and printed the “Slovenian Presidency of the EUSDR 2022–2023” brochure<sup>87</sup>, summarising achievements of the PCY.



Figure 23: EU Strategy for the Danube Region: Stories that make us (cover)

Besides the **videos** produced by the DSP to promote the EUSDR in general and the Danube Strategy Flagships<sup>88</sup> in particular, the EUSDR PAs produced and published videos to promote either a specific EUSDR PA (**PA 8**<sup>89</sup> and **PA 2**<sup>90</sup>), a thematic event (**PA 8** “The Danube Region at the turn of times”)<sup>91</sup> or a challenging topic (PA 4 -“The Wandering Knight of the Waves – The sterlet”<sup>92</sup>, highlighting the importance of water quality for the conservation of migratory fish), while the **UA** and **SI EUSDR PCIES** introduced their programmes and priorities to the EUSDR audiences via videos. The videos used by EUSDR PAs and PCIES to present technical information have boosted viewer engagement by delivering concise, dynamic content that builds a stronger connection with the audience. The videos were also shared via the EUSDR YouTube channel for more reachability. Examples like the **PA 8** video presenting “The Danube Region at the turn of times” event (418 views), the **SI EUSDR PCY** briefly summarising the

<sup>82</sup> EU Strategy for the Danube Region – Stories that make us. [Online](#).

<sup>83</sup> “Gas phase out” flyer. [Online](#).

<sup>84</sup> Water Success Stories 2020-2022 brochure completed. [Online](#).

<sup>85</sup> Danube Region Strategy PA7 Knowledge society. Storybook. [Online](#).

<sup>86</sup> Competitiveness as an effective way to unlock growth and support enterprises in the Danube Region - Digital leaflet. [Online](#).

<sup>87</sup> Slovenian Presidency of the EUSDR 2022–2023. [Online](#).

<sup>88</sup> Danube Region Strategy YouTube channel. [Online](#).

<sup>89</sup> First video of PA 8 – Cooperation across borders. [Online](#).

<sup>90</sup> Main topics of Priority Area 2 ‘Sustainable Energy’ of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region video. [Online](#).

<sup>91</sup> “The Danube Region at the turn of times” video. [Online](#).

<sup>92</sup> Why is it a challenge to be a migratory fish? [Online](#).

main achievements<sup>93</sup> (124 views), or the video produced by the same PCY to announce the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum<sup>94</sup> (257 views).

During the reporting period, the DSP published two **external newsletters** distributed via the EUSDR website to a total of 339 subscribers. The first **newsletter**, published on 31 August 2022<sup>95</sup>, covered various topics including the registration for the 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, the launch of the printed version of the e-brochure titled “EUSDR - Stories that make us”, an article detailing the inaugural EUSDR Embedding Week, an announcement regarding the new EUSDR Instagram channel, and a calendar of upcoming events. The second newsletter was released on 13 December 2023<sup>96</sup>, emphasising the concrete outcomes of the SI EUSDR PCY and the agenda for the forthcoming AT EUSDR PCY.

By delivering structured, engaging, and regular updates, PAs also elaborated and disseminated newsletters. Throughout the reporting period, **PA 10** shared 22 impactful newsletters with its extensive community of over 3 100 subscribers, consistently delivering updates that kept readers in the loop on essential developments, events, and initiatives. Meanwhile, **PA 9** kept a dynamic online community of over 1 100 subscribers informed and engaged through 13 carefully curated newsletters<sup>97</sup>. These updates served as valuable resources, offering timely event announcements, invitations, and the latest insights on studies and policy developments.

**PA 8** published three articles in the “Danube Connect” Magazine: “The Danube Region at the Turn of Times – New forums for cooperation”, reaching 585 views (May 2023)<sup>98</sup>, “Fit for the future: Green Deal information platform”, reaching 434 views (May 2023)<sup>99</sup> and “More resilience in the Danube Region: Danube Alliance Network”, reaching 252 views (May 2023)<sup>100</sup>.

For EUSDR communication measures targeting **internal groups**, the focus was placed on meetings and digital platforms — such as the internal newsletter, the EUSDR intranet, a joint online NC/PAC calendar of relevant events, and national coordination platforms/networks — as the most effective communication tools. The **EUSDR Intranet**<sup>101</sup> facilitates access to meeting documents and other information and reports to all EUSDR NCs and PACs.

In line with the revised EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, the DSP has been active in facilitating new contacts with stakeholders and updating SG members lists to ensure faster communication about the most important topics. While **PA 2** used targeted emails to reach out to SG members and the main stakeholders, **PA 4** ensured communication with DYC members involved in their PA via online meetings. **PA 7** has been using direct mailing as a tool for internal communication using the updated mailing lists and regularly organised online streams with scientists active in the Danube Region to enhance the role of education and science.

EUSDR **PA 10** developed innovative tools for internal communication establishing **Steering Group Coffee Table Talks**, as an informal exchange format for Steering Group members to provide more background information on single topics. This turned out to be particularly useful for new members,

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<sup>93</sup> Recap video of the Slovenian EUSDR Presidency, held from 1 November 2022 until 31 October 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>94</sup> Announcing 12th EUSDR Annual Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>95</sup> 11th EUSDR Annual Forum, Follow-up on the EUSDR Embedding Week, News & Events. [Online](#).

<sup>96</sup> News from the Danube Region (December 2023). [Online](#).

<sup>97</sup> Newsletter June 2022: EUSDR Priority Area 9 “People & Skills”. [Online](#).

<sup>98</sup> The Danube Region at the Turn of Times – New forums for cooperation. [Online](#).

<sup>99</sup> Fit for the future: Green Deal information platform. [Online](#).

<sup>100</sup> More resilience in the Danube Region: Danube Alliance Network. [Online](#).

<sup>101</sup> EUSDR Intranet. [Online](#).

who were less familiar with EUSDR activities and supported members in making informed decisions. The Coffee Table Talks also offered more space to discuss open questions.

Enhancing the visibility of the EUSDR will further contribute to the development of cooperation between EUSDR core stakeholders and intensify their engagement within the EUSDR. In addition, the communication activities will help to disseminate information about projects and processes implemented in line with the EUSDR objectives, to strengthen the ownership of and commitment to the EUSDR and to reach out with concrete examples of EUSDR implementation to the wider public.

## 2.6. Capacity Building

Throughout 2022-2023, the DSP continued to offer capacity building activities for the EUSDR core stakeholders and beyond. Generally, the capacity building activities within the EUSDR can be divided into EUSDR internal activities and activities across the EU MRS. **EUSDR internal capacity building activities** aim at building capacities for specific needs of one or the other PAC and/or for capacity building for EUSDR stakeholders in non-EU countries and include events, workshops and publications dedicated to the EUSDR based on the needs assessed from the EUSDR core stakeholders in 2020.

Based on the needs identified in the **Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders**<sup>102</sup>, the DSP facilitated several capacity-building workshops for EUSDR core stakeholders, co-elaborated the tools together with them and placed special emphasis on enhancing communication to increase the visibility of the Strategy and engage broader target audiences.

Since 2022, capacity-building activities also include targeted sessions and events delivered by the DSP upon request, such as the “**Unfolding EUSDR**” workshop series. These workshops target newly appointed EUSDR stakeholders, harmonising their understanding of the Strategy, fostering synergies, and reducing redundancies in their operations.

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<sup>102</sup> Needs Assessment for closer cooperation between PACs and other relevant stakeholders, 2022. [Online](#).



Figure 24: Impressions of the EUSDR NC/PAC Workshop, 28-30 June 2022, Oradea, RO (© Danube Strategy Point, 2022)

**Capacity building activities across MRS** were facilitated by Interact. Fulfilling its secretariat and platform function, the DSP participated in these working groups, workshops and events, including a meeting of transport coordinators in the four MRS, a workshop on evaluating and communicating the impact of MRS, as well as Working Groups on communication, embedding as well as monitoring and evaluation. By that, the DSP could also take stock of activities from other MRS and to share the EUSDR experiences and achievements in the respective fields across the other MRS and beyond.

Table 4: Capacity building events organised by DSP/Cross-MRS Capacity Building events facilitated or organised by Interact in 2022 and 2023

Type	Date & Place	Focus
<b>Interact Capacity building programme for capacity builders of the EU MRS (4 modules)</b>	9-10 March 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MRS leadership for enhanced performance</li> <li>• MRS implementation formats</li> </ul>
	6-7 April 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MRS monitoring and evaluation</li> </ul>
	4-5 May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live practice: Designing capacity building initiatives for MRS key implementing stakeholders</li> </ul>
	8-9 June 2022 online	
<b>“Unfolding EUSDR” workshop for the upcoming Slovenian EUSDR Presidency</b>	7-8 June 2022 Vienna, AT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation on how to plan the programme of their Presidency</li> <li>• Roles and responsibilities within EUSDR</li> <li>• EUSDR communication strategy, and Reporting/FLC/Monitoring.</li> </ul>
<b>EUSDR National &amp; Priority Area Coordinators Workshops</b>	28-30 June 2022, Oradea, RO, and online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up on the Needs Assessment for Closer Cooperation</li> <li>• Storytelling techniques in disseminating EUSDR key messages and narratives, developing digital communication skills for EUSDR’s promotion</li> </ul>
<b>Training sessions dedicated to stakeholders from the EUSDR non-EU countries</b>	5 September 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic planning</li> </ul>
	6 September 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic management</li> </ul>
	12 September 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project cycle management</li> </ul>
	online	

Type	Date & Place	Focus
<b>Interact Workshop</b> <b>“Impact Stories – added value of the EU Macro -Regions (Mediterranean Coast and MRS Week)</b>	21 September 2022 Izola, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate of the work and impact of MRS in a tangible, easy to understand way</li> </ul>
<b>Training session dedicated to EUSDR PACS</b>	26 September 2022 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership and change management</li> </ul>
<b>Interact Working Group on Monitoring and Evaluation, Kick-Off</b>	4 April 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exchange on Monitoring and Evaluation activities</li> <li>• Exchange of expectation of the Working Group on M&amp;E</li> </ul>
<b>Interact Working Group on Monitoring and Evaluation, 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting</b>	13 June 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updates on Monitoring and Evaluation Activities</li> <li>• Development of scope for the Working Group on M&amp;E</li> <li>• Communication of M&amp;E outcomes and MRS impact</li> </ul>
<b>“Unfolding EUSDR” workshop for national representatives of Republic of Moldova</b>	26-27 June 2023 Chişinău, MD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation of roles, responsibilities and interdependencies of EUSDR stakeholders,</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy, capacity building, embedding EUSDR into 2021-2027 EU funds,</li> <li>• Communication and visual identity/Danube Strategy Flagships.</li> </ul>
<b>“Unfolding EUSDR” workshop for the upcoming Austrian EUSDR Presidency</b>	28 June 2023 Vienna, AT and online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation of roles, responsibilities and interdependencies of EUSDR stakeholders; the steering role of the EUSDR PCY,</li> <li>• Communication/Danube Strategy Flagships and planning/conduction of the EUSDR Annual Forum,</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy, embedding and as youth activities</li> </ul>
<b>“Unfolding EUSDR” workshop for EUSDR PA 1b, PA 8, PA 9, PA 10, and PA 11</b>	7 August 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview of the main documents of the Strategy, discussion and exchange on the roles and responsibilities</li> <li>• How the working methods function at PAC level.</li> <li>• Presentation of roles and responsibilities of the SG and how they reach targets, touch milestones and transform actions into Danube Region realities.</li> </ul>
<b>Interact Working Group on Monitoring and Evaluation, 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting</b>	12 September 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Updates on Monitoring and Evaluation Activities</li> <li>• Reflection on the MRS/EC Reporting process</li> <li>• Reflection on Monitoring of Embedding</li> </ul>
<b>Interact Workshop: EU macro-regional impact – from where to start?</b>	20 September 2023 Izola, SI	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Core concepts of the MRS</li> <li>• Approaches, practices and experiences</li> <li>• Communication of the MRS impact</li> </ul>
<b>“Unfolding EUSDR” workshop for EUSDR PA 1b, PA 2, PA 5, PA 6 and PA 11</b>	16 November 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview of the main documents of the Strategy, discussion and exchange on the roles and responsibilities</li> <li>• How the working methods function at PAC level.</li> <li>• Presentation of roles and responsibilities of the SG and how they reach targets, touch milestones and transform actions into Danube Region realities.</li> </ul>
<b>Interact Working Group on Communication Kick-Off</b>	24 November 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exchange on communication activities</li> <li>• Communication of the MRS impact</li> </ul>
<b>Interact Working Group on Embedding Kick-Off</b>	4 December 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exchange on embedding activities</li> <li>• Discussion on priorities and activities post-27</li> </ul>
<b>“Unfolding EUSDR” workshop for EUSDR NCs and NC teams</b>	13 December 2023 online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview of the main documents of the Strategy, discussion and exchange on the roles and responsibilities.</li> <li>• Presentation of working methods function at NC level.</li> <li>• Implementation of EUSDR and concrete activities coordinated and carried out by NCs.</li> </ul>

Cross-MRS events provide a valuable opportunity for exchanging experiences and best practices between different MRS, fostering greater collaboration and synergies. These interactions not only enhance mutual learning but also contribute significantly to capacity building, strengthening the ability of stakeholders to implement and achieve strategic goals more effectively across the regions.

The annual **EU Macro-regional Strategies Week**, organised by EC/DG REGIO, provides an excellent opportunity for cross-MRS exchange. The event contributes to public understanding of the added value of MRS, features debates about their future development, coordinates exchanges and best practises among the four MRS, and improves the overall understanding of the broad impact of Cohesion Policy on the EC priorities. In 2022 and 2023, the focus of this event has been on engaging different MRS stakeholders, empower them to take charge of the opportunities MRS offer in order to evolve them towards a smart and sustainable future, as well as on energy, skills and funding.

Another well-established event to support cooperation among MRS is the **Mediterranean Coast and Macro-regional Strategies Week**, organised by the Municipality of Izola, SI, together with the Slovenian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and several other ministries. The event is recognised as one of the central occasions where all four MRS meet and exchange on relevant topics which enables to generate new ideas and approaches, build synergies, and ultimately deliver better results and greater added value to macro-regional cooperation. In 2022 and 2023, the event focused, among others, on youth involvement, green transition, circular economy and the evaluation and communication of the impact of the MRS.

**Capacity building within PAs** is strengthened through the implementation of robust onboarding procedures that provide new SG members with the tools and resources they need to succeed in their roles, ensuring that they are adequately prepared to take on their responsibilities and contribute to the EUSDR's goals. EUSDR PAs organised several activities to welcome new members, provide information, and facilitate introductions, inform new members about the PA's work, internal structures, procedures, and activities through various means, including meetings, emails, and presentations, or provide welcome emails or packages containing relevant information. For example, EUSDR **PA 10** developed a guidance for new SG members which includes a guidance paper, an interactive learning platform and an onboarding "learning module" with the PACs<sup>103</sup>.

In September, October, and November 2022, EUSDR **PA 6** carried out educational trainings focusing on advanced communication skills, strategic thinking, motivation, and stress management. The goal was to further improve knowledge and skills needed for strategic thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, effective communication, team motivation, and assertive behaviour. These interactive trainings incorporated practical examples, exercises, presentations, group work and case studies. As an outcome of these Educational Trainings, on the topics of three learning modules, the **Guide for Management and Soft Skills**<sup>104</sup> was developed.

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<sup>103</sup> PA 10's Newcomer Compass. [Online](#).

<sup>104</sup> Guide for Management and Soft Skills, 2022. [Online](#).

## 2.7. Youth Involvement

### EUSDR related Youth Involvement

The involvement of young people in the shaping of our societies has been high on the political agenda on a local, regional, national and European level for several years. The revised EUSDR Action Plan (2020) addresses the strategic objective: “Enhancing Democracy, sound Administration and strong Involvement of Civil Society and Youth”<sup>105</sup>. Hereby, the EUSDR acknowledges the role of young people in enhancing the quality of life in the Danube Region. Additional impetus to these endeavours was given by the European Union’s decision to proclaim 2022 as the **European Year of Youth**<sup>106</sup>, highlighting young people as important drivers of a greener, more inclusive and digital European shared future. The topic of youth involvement is also reflected as a priority in the **EUSDR PCY programmes**<sup>107</sup> of the UA and SI EUSDR PCY.

In order to develop a framework for the institutionalised involvement of young people in the EUSDR, the **Task Force Danube Youth Council (TF DYC)** has been established in 2021 under the SK EUSDR PCY (see EUSDR Implementation Report 2020-2021<sup>108</sup>). Consisting of the incumbent EUSDR PCY, the TRIO PCY, interested EUSDR NCs, the DSP and EC, and with inputs from other experts on youth involvement, this TF discussed modalities for the establishment and implementation of two complementary youth participation structures: the Danube Youth Council (DYC) and the Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON). The TF elaborated the “Proposal for the establishment of the EUSDR Danube Youth Council (DYC) and Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON)”<sup>109</sup>, which was endorsed by NCs in March 2022.

Following this endorsement, the **Danube Youth Council (DYC)** was established in October 2022 as a platform for the institutional involvement of young people in all EUSDR bodies, to make ideas and viewpoints of young people heard and considered on a political level. The DYC is composed of 28 members (18-29 years of age), with two members from each EUSDR member state.

Activities of the DYC include:

- participation in EUSDR core governance meetings, to represent the viewpoints of the young generation and provide EUSDR stakeholders with non-binding advice and recommendations;
- involvement in EUSDR PAs;
- active contribution to the EUSDR Annual Fora and other events/conferences;
- collaboration with the respective EUSDR PCY;
- joint work on specific thematic issues relevant to the Danube Region, e.g., through the publication of papers/essays.

For the first 13 months of its existence (October 2022 – October 2023), the DYC, as a Pilot Action, was funded through a Technical Assistance grant by EC/DG REGIO and co-funded by the City of Vienna. In 2023, under the lead of the SI EUSDR PCY, a long-term financing concept was elaborated and endorsed by EUSDR NCs, ensuring that the DYC can continue to contribute to the EUSDR.

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<sup>105</sup> EUSDR Action Plan, 2020. [Online](#).

<sup>106</sup> European Year of Youth 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>107</sup> The EUSDR Presidency. [Online](#).

<sup>108</sup> EUSDR Implementation Report 2020-2021. [Online](#).

<sup>109</sup> Proposal for the establishment of the EUSDR Danube Youth Council (DYC) & Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON). [Online](#).

Once a year, DYC members meet for the **Danube Youth Camps**, providing a tailor-made capacity building and teambuilding programme as well as a framework for establishing internal structures, procedures, and jointly deciding on future activities. The 1<sup>st</sup> Danube Youth Camp was held on 12-16 December 2022 in Vienna, AT. During five days, the newly appointed DYC members received an intense capacity building about the EUSDR and set up their internal structures and working modes. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Danube Youth Camp was held on 21-23 October 2023 in Šempeter pri Gorici, SI, split in two components: The first day focused on DYC-internal processes; on the second and third day, the DYC members, together with selected youth representatives of the other three MRS, participated in the POPRI Startup Challenge<sup>110</sup>, an intense two-day challenge using “hackathon” methodology, to develop possible solutions for brain drain in the Danube Region. The results of the POPRI Challenge were presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Brdo pri Kranju, SI, where a dedicated youth panel was organised.



Figure 25: Impressions of the 1st Danube Youth Camp, 12-16 December 2022, Vienna, AT (© Danube Strategy Point, 2022)

As regards the **involvement of the DYC in EUSDR PAs**, the DYC members were asked to choose one to three PAs they would like to get involved in, based in their individual fields of interest. A round of initial matchmaking meetings was facilitated by the DSP in early 2023 and followed-up on individual basis and by a survey by the end of 2023. Most PAs reported that after this initial matchmaking, they were in regular exchange with the respective DYC members. In almost all PAs, DYC members participated in SG meetings, to provide inputs and represent the youth perspective. Several PAs granted the DYC members observer status in the SGs. Some examples of practical cooperation with the DYC members, other than participation in SG meetings, include: In **PA 2**, a DYC member was actively involved in the organisation and moderation of the green district heating workshops, organised by PA 2 in October

<sup>110</sup> 2nd Danube Youth Camp & POPRI Startup Challenge. [Online](#).

2023 in Zagreb, HR, and Tuzla, BA. In **PA 4**, the NYC members were consulted in the preparation phase of a baseline study on young people's knowledge of the Danube and water quality protection. **PA 5** established contact between the NYC and the ICPDR. In **PA 8**, several NYC members regularly attend SG meetings and conferences, and provide valuable suggestions on how to further improve the activities of the PA. **PA 9** included the NYC members, among others, in the PA 9 Stakeholder Conference and thematic workshops. **PA 10** consulted the NYC for the preparation and organisation of the Danube Participation Day 2023.

Several PAs (**PA 6**, **PA 7**) reported that the cooperation with the NYC is not very active yet. In **PA 1a**, some fields for cooperation with the NYC have been identified, with the practical implementation of these activities planned for 2024. In **PA 11**, the confidential nature of police documents poses a challenge for the involvement of NYC members. However, it was possible to invite the NYC members to the 10<sup>th</sup> DARIF Operation, held in September 2023 in Mohács, HU, which was highly appreciated by the NYC. For the next period, PA 11 intends to deepen the cooperation with the NYC by inviting the NYC members to express their views on how the Danube Region could become a more secure place to study, work and live, and how the law enforcement community could contribute to this process.

As a complementary structure to the NYC, the **Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON)**<sup>111</sup> was conceptualised in the 2022 proposal as an open network of national and/or regional youth organisations active in the Danube Region. While the NYC consists of 28 individuals, the DYON intends to offer a platform for youth organisations to cooperate and share their needs and experiences among themselves and with the NYC and EUSDR core stakeholders. Through this network, the EUSDR could enlarge its outreach to much broader numbers of young people.

In June 2023, under the SI EUSDR PCY, an "Expression of interest" form for youth organisations was opened on the EUSDR website. Over the first months, more than 40 youth organisations indicated their interest to join the DYON. The AT EUSDR PCY (starting 1 November 2023) decided to take up the establishment of the DYON during their chair, making it a part of their PCY programme<sup>112</sup>. A first online meeting of the youth organisations was organised on 7 December 2023, followed by a meeting of the TF NYC, interested PACs and NYC members on the same day, in order to discuss the ideas raised by the youth organisations and a possible framework for the setup of the DYON. The next steps would follow in 2024, under the guidance of the AT EUSDR PCY.

### **Strategic Youth Involvement in the Danube Region**

Other youth-related activities, apart from the NYC and the DYON, included:

**PA 4** was actively involved in the organisation of the webinar "Meaningful youth engagement in the Danube Region and beyond: Best practices from organisations, key capacities for youth to bring to the 10<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum", held in December 2023. Also in 2023, PA 4 conducted a baseline study to gain insight into young people's knowledge of the Danube and water quality protection and their possible shortcomings. A total of 300 young people (aged 15-25) participated in the survey.

In November 2023, **PA 4** and **PA 7** jointly organised a live-streamed expert discussion targeted at young people on the topic: "Karst springs in relation to climate change impacts".

**PA 7** continued to be involved in the organisation of the **Danubius Young Scientist Award**<sup>113</sup>. Since 2014, this prize is annually awarded to young scientists from all Danube Region countries who

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<sup>111</sup> Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON). [Online](#).

<sup>112</sup> Austrian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region Programme, 2023-2024. [Online](#).

<sup>113</sup> Danubius Young Scientist Award. [Online](#).

demonstrate scientific excellence and whose research is thematically relevant for the Danube Region. The candidates for the award are nominated by their respective scientific institutions; the selection is then carried out by an international jury of experts. Additionally, in the thematic conference "Towards knowledge-driven society and professions of the future" (17-18 May 2023, Brdo pri Kranju, SI), the youth dimension was also covered.

For **PA 9** and **PA 10**, due to the thematic fields covered, civil society and young generations represent target stakeholder groups within the PA activities. Young people were in the focus of many activities and events, such as the **PA 9 Stakeholder Conferences**. The 10<sup>th</sup> Stakeholder Conference<sup>114</sup> was organised in June 2022 under the title: "Young People in Times of Crisis: Building Responsive Education, Training and Labour Market Systems in the Danube Region". It focused on challenges and future priorities with respect to effective education, training and labour market policies and related projects to support young people in the Danube Region in the context of current crises like the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19-pandemic and climate change. The 11<sup>th</sup> Stakeholder Conference<sup>115</sup>, organised in November 2023, focused on the pressure of education, labour market and social systems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and in particular the war in the Ukraine. The risks of increased learning losses, early school leaving and educational inequalities due to home schooling since the outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine were discussed. PA 9 also continued to be involved in a number of projects<sup>116</sup> dealing with reducing low achievement in basic skills, strengthening transversal and key competences, enhancing the anticipation of skills needs, improving the labour market relevance of education, promoting Vocational Education and Training (VET), and fostering lifelong learning (LLL) strategies.

In **PA 10**, young people were involved in various activities, networks and events, such as the annual Danube Participation Day and the meetings of the Danube Local Actors Platform (D-LAP)<sup>117</sup>. In 2022, PA 10 organised a "Strategic Project Webinar"<sup>118</sup> on how to develop successful projects that involve young people. EUSDR PA 10 continued the close cooperation with the Danube Youth Network (DYN)<sup>119</sup>, which was certified as a Danube Strategy Flagship in 2023. Moreover, PA 10 continued to be actively involved in the co-organisation of the **Young Bled Strategic Forum (Young BSF)**<sup>120</sup>, an annual event for young leaders from all over the world, taking place each August in Bled, SI. Since its launch in 2011, the Young BSF has become a unique meeting place for a diverse array of young leaders, entrepreneurs, influencers, thinkers and social activists, offering them a platform to share their visions, exchange ideas and connect among each other and with decision-makers, think tank representatives, private sector representatives, representatives at the regional and local level as well as other stakeholders, including representatives of the DYC.

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<sup>114</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> Stakeholder Conference 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>115</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> Stakeholder Conference 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>116</sup> PA 9 Overview of Projects. [Online](#).

<sup>117</sup> Danube Local Actors Platform. [Online](#).

<sup>118</sup> Strategic Project Webinars. [Online](#).

<sup>119</sup> Danube Youth Network. [Online](#).

<sup>120</sup> Young Bled Strategic Forum. [Online](#).

### 3. Developments and Achievements in EUSDR Priority Areas

Twelve EUSDR Priority Areas (PAs) represent fields of action in which the EUSDR is contributing to improvements – either through tackling main challenges or through seizing main opportunities. The twelve PAs, composed of Priority Area Coordinators (PACs/teams) and Steering Group (SG) members are grouped into four Pillars. The PAs represent the most important and vital components of the Strategy. PACs and the SG members provide the expertise in the respective sector and drive forward the overall process, identifying key fields for action and adopting the most suitable goals to implement actions according to the revised EUSDR Action Plan (2020)<sup>121</sup>. Having an overview of their respective sector, they identify key processes leading to the implementation of the Strategy's goals through different actions and through selecting on how to best develop solutions in a collaborative setting. The following sections describe the **main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework**, which would be particularly difficult or impossible to realise without the Strategy, for the years 2022-2023. Likewise, the PA-specific **policy development** and **projects and processes** in terms of implementation and funding are presented.

#### 3.1.Pillar 1 – Connecting the Danube Region

Pillar 1 of the Danube Region Strategy aims to contribute to sustainable, inclusive and intelligent regional development through measures in the areas of transport, energy, culture and tourism. The overall focus is on improving connectivity in the Region. The joint efforts of the Danube Region member states in planning, financing and implementing strategic activities have contributed to a better coordination of infrastructure projects, the operation of transport and energy systems, the exchange of best practices in the field of clean energy and the promotion of Danube culture and tourism.



#### PA 1a Waterways Mobility

##### **Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework**

Between 2022 and 2023, EUSDR Priority Area 1a underscored the commitment to improving connectivity and operational efficiency in the Danube Region and achieved significant progress in enhancing the Region's transport infrastructure and operational efficiency. Key accomplishments include the implementation of the **Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan**<sup>122</sup>, which was reaffirmed at the 2022 Connecting Europe Days event in Lyon, FR, where **Danube Region Transport Ministers**<sup>123</sup>, alongside EU Transport Commissioner Adina Vălean, reiterated their commitment. The **FAIRway Danube II project**<sup>124</sup> further advances the Master Plan's objectives. In the field of **streamlining border control procedures**, PA 1a, in collaboration with PA 11, continued **reducing bureaucracy and enhancing navigation** along the Danube. This included the **simplification**,

<sup>121</sup> EUSDR Action Plan, 2020. [Online](#).

<sup>122</sup> PA 1a Strategic and Political Documents. [Online](#).

<sup>123</sup> Conclusions on effective waterway infrastructure rehabilitation and maintenance on the Danube and its navigable tributaries, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>124</sup> FAIRway Danube II. [Online](#).

**standardisation, and digitisation of DAVID forms<sup>125</sup>** at EU and Schengen borders, benefiting the shipping industry by improving the efficiency of border controls. Work also commenced on developing **a tool for reserving time slots for border checks**. The **establishment of new cross-border networks and processes**, including **cooperation between transportation ministries and waterway authorities**, was facilitated. Additionally, collaboration between different thematic sectors, such as biodiversity and security, was promoted to ensure a holistic approach to regional development.

The activities within the framework of the EUSDR have not only facilitated the **creation of transnational and cross-thematic networks** but have also ensured that the outcomes of flagship projects are consistently **highlighted to top-level policymakers** at both national and European levels. This ongoing engagement has **reinforced the strategic importance of these initiatives**, securing their place on the **political agenda and driving coordinated action** across the Danube Region. The added value of the EUSDR lies in its ability to **connect diverse stakeholders, align regional efforts with broader EU objectives**, and **translate project outcomes into impactful, high-level policy decisions**.

### Policy development

Through its six main actions, EUSDR PA 1a has effectively addressed key challenges in inland waterway transport, including infrastructure, business development, fleet modernisation, digitalisation, personnel shortages, and administrative burdens. By establishing Working Groups, EUSDR PA 1a has successfully linked these regional challenges with European policy priorities and funding opportunities.

EUSDR PA 1a has made a significant contribution to the **policy development of the Trans-European Network for Transport (TEN-T)** by actively **advancing the implementation of the Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan**. This has been achieved through **consistent engagement in bi-annual Ministerial meetings** and the **coordination of key transnational projects**, such as **FAIRway Danube**, which have collectively reinforced the strategic objectives of the TEN-T framework. The coordination of transnational projects under EUSDR PA 1a has **contributed to the policy-making process**, particularly in **infrastructure development**. Additionally, EUSDR PA 1a has facilitated **expert exchanges** during SG meetings to support EUSDR member states in **aligning national efforts with European ambitions**, such as **achieving zero emissions in the transport system by 2050**.

### Projects and processes – implementation & funding

The **FAIRway works! in the Rhine-Danube Corridor<sup>126</sup>** initiative **clusters and implements the most advanced waterway-related projects within the Danube Corridor**, marking a significant step in the execution of the Corridor Work Plan. This initiative aims to **close infrastructure quality gaps, enhance efficiency** (e.g., improvements at the Iron Gate lock, upgraded fairway marking, and high-quality mooring facilities), **boost sustainability** (by promoting inland navigation, increasing capacity, reducing travel times, and providing shore-side electricity), and **increase user benefits** (e.g., improved safety at locks and better surveying information). In 2023, the **FAIRway Danube II** follow-up project, co-financed by the CEF programme with a total budget of EUR 70 million (EUR 47 million funded by the EU), was successfully launched to further advance the Master Plan's objectives and to continue the modernisation of the Danube fairway. FAIRway Danube II builds on the success of the original **CEF flagship FAIRway Danube project<sup>127</sup>**, which greatly enhanced knowledge of shallow sections and led to the development of rehabilitation measures. The **RIS COMEX (RIS Corridor Management**

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<sup>125</sup> WG 6 – Administrative Processes. [Online](#).

<sup>126</sup> FAIRway works! in the Rhine-Danube Corridor. [Online](#).

<sup>127</sup> FAIRway Danube. [Online](#).

**Execution)**<sup>128</sup> project aims to **establish Corridor RIS (River Information Services) for authorities and logistics users** within inland navigation, ensuring these **services transition into sustainable operation**. While previous RIS implementation efforts were primarily centred on developing national RIS infrastructures with some pilot activities for international data exchange, RIS COMEX focuses on **providing seamless, easy-to-access information for fairway users, logistics stakeholders, and relevant authorities**.



## PA 1b Rail-Road-Air Mobility

### Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework

The EUSDR PA 1b SG members made significant progress in **discussing governance issues, ensuring compliance with EU transport policy, and reviewing projects** that provide added value for the Danube Region. Key topics included the new **EU Urban Mobility Framework (UMF, 2021)**<sup>129</sup>, with a focus on the **revision of TEN-T Guidelines**<sup>130</sup> and the introduction of the **new TEN-T Western Balkans transport corridor**<sup>131</sup>, as well as the third **revision of the Eurovignette Directive**<sup>132</sup>. Moreover, EUSDR PA 1b successfully organised the 7<sup>th</sup> stakeholder conference of the **Danube Region Transport Days: Towards Efficient, Sustainable Transport**<sup>133</sup>, held in 2022 in Ljubljana, SI. The event featured 20 distinguished speakers and attracted around 100 participants from Danube Region countries, further strengthening collaboration and advancing sustainable transport initiatives in the Region. In 2023, INTERACT initiated and co-organised the **4 MRS Transport Coordinators Meeting**<sup>134</sup> in Brussels, BE, which aimed to facilitate **open exchanges on cross-MRS collaboration** and explored ways to **enhance political support and recognition of MRS within the EU and beyond**. EUSDR PA 1b further participated at the **4<sup>th</sup> EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week**<sup>135</sup>, contributing to an **online stakeholder session focused on addressing the energy crisis in transport**. During the **12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum**<sup>136</sup> in Brdo pri Kranju, SI, EUSDR PA 1b organised a panel on **Mobility & Multimodality: The Impact of Large Projects for Improved Connectivity**<sup>137</sup>. The panel highlighted key projects in the Danube Region that enhance mobility, connectivity, and cohesion, while also addressing their environmental, economic, and social impacts.

The strategic added value of involving all Danube Region countries, both EU and non-EU, in managing transport-related issues lies in **fostering seamless, efficient, safe, and secure mobility across the entire Region**. This cooperation between the Danube countries is crucial for **integrating the transport systems of the EU and accession countries**, thereby **bridging gaps in transport services, logistics, and road safety**. Furthermore, it plays a vital role in **enhancing regional air connectivity**, contributing to a **more cohesive and well-connected Danube Region**.

<sup>128</sup> RIS COMEX – RIS Corridor Management Execution. [Online](#).

<sup>129</sup> Sustainable transport – new urban mobility framework. [Online](#).

<sup>130</sup> Trans-European transport network (TEN-T) – revised guidelines. [Online](#).

<sup>131</sup> Western Balkans, Transport. [Online](#).

<sup>132</sup> Legislative Train Schedule. [Online](#).

<sup>133</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> Danube Region Transport Days 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>134</sup> Report Cross-MRS transport coordinators meeting, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>135</sup> Call open to form part of the 4<sup>th</sup> EU MRS Week programme, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>136</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>137</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum Report. [Online](#).

## Policy development

The policy impact of EUSDR PA 1b has shown meaningful contributions, particularly in **supporting the revision of the TEN-T guidelines**. While its impact on other key EU policies, such as the European Green Deal (EGD), is still developing, PA 1b has proactively **aligned its activities with the EGD** and is committed to **addressing emerging challenges in the transport sector**, including **job creation, digitalisation**, and the **integration of autonomous vehicles**. The EUSDR plays a pivotal role in supporting EU enlargement by **enhancing connectivity** and **reducing disparities in transport services and logistics** across the Region. Since the Strategy's inception in 2011, significant progress has been made to **integrate transport infrastructure networks** and **strengthen regional cohesion**. PA 1b has also made vital **contributions to crisis management** by supporting the **establishment of green corridors** during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the flow of essential goods. Further, the **corridors between Ukraine and the EU for refugees** during the ongoing Russian unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, with a continued focus on **ensuring safe freight corridors**, were supported.

## Projects and processes – implementation & funding

In the period 2022/2023, the EUSDR PA 1b supported several projects and processes, some of which were labelled as **Danube Strategy Flagships**<sup>138</sup>. The stakeholder conference series, **Danube Region Transport Days (DRTD)**<sup>139</sup>, was established to foster a **better understanding and high-level support** for a shared vision on **future infrastructure and mobility needs** through 2030, 2040, and 2045. The outcomes from the **7<sup>th</sup> conference “Towards energy-efficient, sustainable transport”**<sup>140</sup> organised on 28-29 November 2022 in Ljubljana, SI, provided **critical input for strategic decisions and actions** of EUSDR PA 1b within the EUSDR Action Plan. Additionally, the conference played a crucial role in **raising awareness** about the necessity of joint efforts for transnational and cross-border projects that offer significant added value to the Danube Region. The **development of an interconnected and integrated transport system** across the Danube Region is a key macro-regional challenge that aligns with both national priorities and EU objectives for a **more connected, greener, and low-carbon Europe**. The **Danube Region Multimodal Corridors project**<sup>141</sup> focuses on **identifying and enhancing multimodal corridors** along the TEN-T network, particularly **improving connectivity between EU and non-EU member states**, as well as strengthening **links between the Northern Adriatic and the Black Sea**, including **intermodal connections with river- and seaports** across the macro-region. The **SUSTANCE (Sustainable Public Transport Solutions) project**<sup>142</sup> aims to **introduce innovative public transport services and governance schemes to improve connectivity** in Central Europe. By **linking peripheral regions to major urban transport nodes** and TEN-T hubs, the project seeks to **reduce individual car use**, thereby lowering greenhouse gas emissions and fostering socio-economic development in the Danube Region.

**Hungary finished the reconstruction of the Budapest Southern Danube Railway Bridge, which is part of the MED, RD and OEM TEN-T core network corridors** replacing the two old (built shortly after WW II) superstructures with three new ones by Q3 2022. The action was supported by the CEF. **Three new Ipoly/Ipel’ bridges were finished by 2023**. Q2 (Órhalom-Vrbovka, Ipolydamásd-Helemba) and by 2023.

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<sup>138</sup> Danube Strategy Flagships. [Online](#).

<sup>139</sup> Danube Region Transport Days (DRTD). [Online](#).

<sup>140</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> Danube Region Transport Days 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>141</sup> Danube Region Multimodal Corridors. [Online](#).

<sup>142</sup> SUSTANCE – Sustainable public transport solutions and innovative governance schemes for improving connectivity in Central Europe. [Online](#).

Q3 (Drégelypalánk-Ipel'ske Predmostie) **between HU and SK**. The investments are financed by ERDF (HU-SK CBC).



## PA 2 Sustainable Energy

### **Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework**

A **comprehensive study**<sup>143</sup> by EUSDR PA 2 analysed the Danube Region's dependency on Russian gas and **proposed measures to reduce it in the short and long term** as part of an energy transition. Recommendations included prioritising demand reduction, avoiding direct gas subsidies, developing LNG infrastructure, and emphasising solidarity and interconnection among countries. Key findings were disseminated through an **online policy workshop at the EU Sustainable Energy Week (EUSEW) 2022**<sup>144</sup>, and **further discussions** were held at the 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum in Košice, SK,<sup>145</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> MRS Week in Brussels, BE,<sup>146</sup> **on accelerating the natural gas phase-out**, including all four MRS. In the field of **decarbonisation of heating and cooling**, a **study**<sup>147</sup> was completed in 2022, with a focus on **geothermal energy**, where Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia were identified as having significant potential for geothermal district heating. **Workshops**<sup>148</sup> were therefore organised in Zagreb, HR, and Tuzla, BA, in 2023 to **facilitate the transfer of knowledge between** Hungarian geothermal experts and local energy companies and to **identify financing options** for renewable heating systems. EUSDR PA 2 further emphasised the **development of a hydrogen economy** in the Danube Region, organising a **workshop** at the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum<sup>149</sup> and producing a **promotional video on hydrogen**<sup>150</sup>. The launch of the **DESTINE website**<sup>151</sup> provided a central information hub on sustainable energy, including interactive resources on geothermal heating. For EUSDR PA 2's **continued efforts and commitment to advancing sustainable energy, enhancing regional cooperation, and addressing the energy challenges** faced by the Danube Region, a **study**<sup>152</sup> was conducted in 2022, focusing on **energy efficiency in residential buildings** across the Danube Region, while **identifying best practices** and **proposing measures to increase renovation rates** in line with EU goals.

The activities of EUSDR PA 2 provide strategic added value by **contributing transnationally** to the secure, clean, and affordable energy transition in the Danube Region, **aligning (on EU and non-EU level) with ambitious EU climate and energy targets** such as those outlined in the Paris Agreement, the European Green Deal, the Fit for 55 Package, and RePowerEU. The focus on decarbonising the heating and cooling sector addresses a **critical area often overlooked at the national level**. To this end, EUSDR PA 2 produced several expert materials on geothermal heating<sup>153</sup> and organised expert

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<sup>143</sup> Phasing out Russian gas in the Danube Region, Final Study, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>144</sup> European Sustainable Energy Week 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>145</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>146</sup> Call open to form part of the 4<sup>th</sup> EU MRS Week programme, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>147</sup> Decarbonisation of heating and cooling sector – promotion of green district heating in the Danube Region, Feasibility study. [Online](#).

<sup>148</sup> District heating system decarbonisation workshop, Zagreb. [Online](#). & District heating system decarbonisation workshop, Tuzla. [Online](#).

<sup>149</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>150</sup> Enhancing hydrogen economy in the EUSDR. [Online](#).

<sup>151</sup> DESTINE, EUSDR PA 2 Website. [Online](#). & DESTINE Website. [Online](#).

<sup>152</sup> Energy Performance of Buildings in Danube Region. Overview of new and refurbished residential buildings stock. [Online](#).

<sup>153</sup> PA 2 Studies. [Online](#).

workshops to **consolidate the topic at the macro-regional level and in the multi-level governance systems to increase the visibility of this topic.**

### **Policy development**

The strategic policy development of EUSDR PA 2 has been significantly influenced by the unprovoked Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in early 2022, leading to an intensified PA focus on addressing the challenges of energy security, rising energy prices, and reducing dependency on Russian fossil fuel, directly supporting EU energy policies and broader energy transition goals.

The EUSDR PA 2 activities played a crucial role in **strengthening the energy security** of the Danube Region and Europe by **exploring strategies for phasing out Russian gas**. In addition, EUSDR PA 2's work on **energy efficiency in buildings aligns with the EU's Renovation Wave**<sup>154</sup>, helping to identify and address the Region's specific challenges and opportunities. EUSDR PA 2 therefore **prioritised the decarbonisation of heating systems**, a critical component of the energy transition, given that 75% of the EU's heating and cooling is still fossil fuel-based. In this respect, EUSDR PA 2 is dedicated to **supporting EU accession countries** in their decarbonisation efforts, integrating their energy markets, and **implementing EU energy policies**. This includes sharing best practices, such as workshops on geothermal heating in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as presentations at international conferences like IRENA's event on renewable energy solutions in the Republic of Moldova. **Recognising the potential of hydrogen** in the energy transition and as a future energy source, EUSDR PA 2 began focusing on this emerging technology, with plans to **influence related policies at the regional, national and the EU level**. Through these efforts, such as workshops and panels, EUSDR PA 2 is actively supporting the transition to greener energy systems and enhancing energy security in the Danube Region, thus **supporting the EU countries in meeting their 2030 national targets in line with EU energy policies**.

### **Projects and processes – implementation & funding**

EUSDR PA 2 has **actively supported the development of energy-related projects** that align with the strategic priorities, focusing on the transport and storage of renewable energy sources, hydrogen, energy communities and geothermal heating. In the years 2022-2023, PA 2 facilitated the issuance of several **Letters of Recommendation (LoR)** and participated as an **Associated Strategic Partner (ASP)** in various project proposals aimed at advancing the energy transition within the Danube Region, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing among stakeholders to enhance the Region's energy infrastructure and capacity. The projects in which EUSDR PA 2 has actively engaged with, were **submitted to and received funding from manifold funding programmes** such as the European City Facility, the Interreg Danube Region Programme, Interreg Central Europe Programme, Interreg Europe Programme, LIFE and Horizon Europe. Through its strategic actions and partnerships, such as the **European Energy Award along the Danube**<sup>155</sup>, EUSDR PA 2 has made significant strides in promoting sustainable energy initiatives in the Danube Region. The continued support for innovative energy projects, namely, **HyEfre**<sup>156</sup>, **Danube Indeet**<sup>157</sup>, **Danube GeHeCo**<sup>158</sup>, **NRGCOM**<sup>159</sup>, **StoreMore**<sup>160</sup> and **SMEnergy**<sup>161</sup>, not only aligns with regional objectives but also contributes to the broader goals of

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<sup>154</sup> Renovation Wave. [Online](#).

<sup>155</sup> Project eea along the Danube. [Online](#).

<sup>156</sup> HyEfre. [Online](#).

<sup>157</sup> Danube Indeet. [Online](#).

<sup>158</sup> Danube GeoHeCo. [Online](#).

<sup>159</sup> NRGCOM. [Online](#).

<sup>160</sup> Storemore. [Online](#).

<sup>161</sup> SMEnergy. [Online](#).

energy sustainability and community resilience in Europe. Moving forward, PA 2 will continue to facilitate project development and encourage collaborative efforts to achieve a greener, more energy-efficient Danube Region.



## PA 3 Culture & Tourism

### **Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework**

To enhance the operational dimension of the EUSDR Action Plan for PA 3 and establish coherent implementation targets, a **series of participatory events**<sup>162</sup> were organised. These initiatives aimed to foster collaboration with SG members and relevant stakeholders, promoting cooperation at both regional and macro-regional levels. Representatives from EUSDR PA 3 actively participated in these events. Their involvement facilitated **valuable discussions, gathered insights, and strengthened partnerships among diverse stakeholders**. The new coordination project for EUSDR PAC 3 support aims to **establish clear and measurable targets** and **develop mechanisms for assessing project contributions** toward achieving the objectives outlined in the EUSDR Action Plan. This initiative builds on the roadmap created in the previous Interreg DTP PA 2 PAC project.

The collaborative approach by EUSDR PA 3 is crucial for achieving strategic objectives, particularly in expanding the stakeholder network. By enhancing collaboration and communication, the Strategy framework aims to **better inform policies in the fields of tourism and culture**, ultimately fostering a more integrated and effective implementation of the EUSDR initiatives.

### **Policy development**

*Information on policy development was not provided.*

### **Projects and processes – implementation & funding**

In the context of EUSDR PA 3, several **Danube Strategy Flagships** were identified and promoted<sup>163</sup>. These projects represent key initiatives that aim to strengthen sustainable tourism and culture initiatives in the Danube Region while promoting small-scale funding opportunities. In projects of the **first DRP call**<sup>164</sup>, PA 3 took the role of **Associated Strategic Partner (ASP) in driving cross-border cooperation**. These projects have laid the groundwork for new approaches to preserving cultural heritage and promoting tourism as a lever for economic growth and social inclusion. The second call of the DRP presented an opportunity to further strengthen regional cooperation, with a project proposal being discussed together with the SG.

The **Iron Age Danube Route (IADR) was selected for a new Cultural Route of the Council of Europe** and the certification ceremony was held in November 2022. The HU EUSDR national coordination financed the publication of the IADR Magazine in 2022 to help awareness raising and the cooperation of partner institutions from eight Danube countries.

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<sup>162</sup> PA 3 Workshop on innovation and digitalisation for interpretation, communication and marketing strategies, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>163</sup> Danube Strategy Flagships. [Online](#).

<sup>164</sup> Interreg Danube Region Programme Call for Proposals. [Online](#).

## 3.2. Pillar 2 – Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region

The Danube basin is characterised by complex and yet fragile ecosystems and habitats underpinning all human activities. Sustainable use of natural resources and the overall preservation of the quality of environment are main challenges in the Danube Region. Thus, the EUSDR Priority Areas propose specific cooperation activities for restoring and maintaining water quality, managing environmental risks and preserving biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soil. Stakeholders in the PAs across the Danube Region developed joint measures to protect and restore the quality of natural assets, forming a wide variety of ecosystems. At the same time, integrated activities were designed in order to prevent, prepare for and respond to disasters.



### PA 4 Water Quality

#### **Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework**

During the 2022-2023 period, EUSDR PA 4 focused on several key water-related initiatives, making **notable progress in areas such as hazardous and emerging substances, water and agriculture, fish migration, drinking water, and youth involvement**. EUSDR PA 4 focused on enhancing cooperation, increasing knowledge exchange, and securing financing for water quality initiatives in the Danube Region. Additionally, EUSDR PA 4 fostered a new partnership with the International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area (IAWD). The online brochure “**Green Agriculture - sustainable agriculture measures implementation in the Danube Region – case studies**”<sup>165</sup> was issued in 2022. The brochure outlines sustainable agricultural practices, particularly those aimed at reducing nutrient pollution in water systems, and serves as a practical resource for policymakers and stakeholders in the Danube Region. The advancement of fish migration and conservation efforts included the preparation of the “**Fish migration restoration document**”<sup>166</sup> in 2022, the “**Ship noise and water wave measurement on the Hungarian section of the Danube study**”<sup>167</sup> finalised in 2022, as well as the **mapping of those Hungarian middle-Danube riverbank sections which are mostly exposed to shipping induced waves**. The English version of the **Action plan for the conservation of sterlet (Acipenser ruthenus) in Hungary**<sup>168</sup> was published in 2023 by the Hungarian national coordination and the plan was accompanied by technical studies on migration routes through barriers such as the Iron Gates and Gabčíkovo water structures and the organisation of the Fish migration working meeting<sup>169</sup> (October 2022). EUSDR PA 4 continued to address the impacts of climate change, organising in 2023 the conference **Adapting to Climate change in relation to WATER – Changes in the qualitative and quantitative parameters of waters in the light of climate change**<sup>170</sup>. The event provided an opportunity for regional experts to share their experiences and discuss water-related climate policies, with an emphasis on nature-based solutions, and also showcased some approaches from outside the Danube Region. The international workshop **Securing**

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<sup>165</sup> Brochure about Green Agriculture. [Online](#).

<sup>166</sup> Fish Migration Restoration Document. [Online](#).

<sup>167</sup> Ship noise and water wave measurement on the Hungarian section of the Danube. [Online](#).

<sup>168</sup> An action plan for the conservation of sterlet (Acipenser ruthenus) in Hungary prepared. [Online](#).

<sup>169</sup> Fish migration working meeting. [Online](#).

<sup>170</sup> EUSDR Conference on Adapting to Climate change in relation to WATER in Budapest. [Online](#).

**Drinking Water Supply**<sup>171</sup> was organised in 2023 providing a platform for exchange of knowledge and best practices related to the implementation of the Drinking Water Directive (EU) 2020/2184 in the Danube Region. Youth engagement was a EUSDR PA 4 priority, with continued support for youth-related activities such as educational games and summer schools. A baseline survey on **youth knowledge regarding environment and water protection**<sup>172</sup> in the Danube Region was conducted and published by EUSDR PA 4 in 2023. This initiative also included the DYC. A total of 300 young Hungarians aged 15-25 participated in a survey that was focused on young people's attitudes towards environmental protection, with a specific focus to water protection in the Danube Region.

The added value of EUSDR PA 4 during the 2022/2023 period lies in its comprehensive focus on **improving water quality and environmental sustainability in the Danube Region**. Through initiatives addressing hazardous substances, sustainable agriculture, fish migration, and drinking water, it enhanced cooperation and knowledge exchange among regional stakeholders. The publication of key studies and educational materials, the organisation of climate-related conferences and workshops and active youth engagement further highlight its role in fostering partnerships and driving progress on water protection and climate adaptation in the Region.

### **Policy development**

EUSDR PA 4 became actively engaged in the **EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters"**<sup>173</sup>. Aligning its objectives with broader EU goals, EUSDR PA 4 focused on **the restoration of freshwater ecosystems**. This engagement demonstrated EUSDR PA 4's role in advancing EU water-related priorities within the Danube Region. EUSDR PA 4 facilitated important developments in **connecting agriculture with water management**. The release of the **Green Agriculture brochure**<sup>174</sup>, which highlights **organic farming practices and nutrient management strategies**, represents a significant step in addressing pollution from agriculture. This initiative helps **bridge the gap between agricultural and environmental policies**, fostering greater cooperation between these sectors. Moreover, EUSDR PA 4 supported policy measures that align with the European Green Deal, focusing on **reducing water pollution, improving water retention in agricultural practices, and enhancing climate adaptation efforts**. This work ensured that the Danube Region is better positioned to tackle the challenges posed by climate change, particularly in the areas of water quality and quantity. EUSDR PA 4 actively contributed to **bridging local and regional actions with European priorities** by keeping stakeholders informed on issues such as climate change and drinking water through workshops and the dissemination of promotional materials. These events allowed local stakeholders to engage with experts and **exchange ideas on new legislative measures and best practices as well as to seek effective and optimal solutions**. An **institutional cooperation** with the International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area (IAWD)<sup>175</sup>, was initiated in 2023 aiming at creating win-win solutions in the areas that are mutually relevant for both entities.

### **Projects and processes – implementation & funding**

The ongoing effort to provide information on funding opportunities during the EUSDR PA 4 SG meetings included promoting centrally managed EC programmes and gathering data on water-related financing needs. To assist stakeholders in navigating these opportunities, supporting materials like the

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<sup>171</sup> Securing Drinking Water Supply – workshop. [Online](#).

<sup>172</sup> A basic study of the involvement of young people. [Online](#).

<sup>173</sup> EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters. [Online](#).

<sup>174</sup> Brochure about Green Agriculture. [Online](#).

<sup>175</sup> International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area (IAWD). [Online](#).

**Funding brochure for water projects**<sup>176</sup> or a success stories brochure<sup>177</sup> were published in 2022 that highlight important projects in the respective period. EUSDR PA 4 promoted European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programmes, putting an emphasis on cross-border and transnational cooperation, which were discussed during SG meetings and conferences. Moreover EUSDR PA 4 has been active in project generation and support via **Letters of Recommendation**<sup>178</sup>. Seven LoRs were issued in 2022 and one in 2023 towards facilitating the implementation of the EUSDR PA 4 objectives. During 2022/2023, EUSDR PA 4 supported and contributed to the implementation of significant number of projects, with a variety of funding sources – DTP/DRP, LIFE, Horizon – addressing various topics such as water management, water pollution, restoration of freshwater ecosystems in the Danube River Basin, reduction of hazardous substances in the water, restoration of ecological connectivity and safeguarding the functionality of ecological corridors. Notable EUSDR PA 4 initiatives include the **CLEANDANUBE**<sup>179</sup> project, which raises public awareness about plastic pollution in rivers, and the **DALIA**<sup>180</sup> project, providing tools for better decision-making and ecosystem restoration in the Danube River Basin. The **Danube Hazard m3c**<sup>181</sup> project aims to control and reduce hazardous substance pollution, while the **Deepwater-CE**<sup>182</sup> project explores the role of Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR) in addressing water management challenges in Central European countries. The **IDES**<sup>183</sup> project focused on improving water quality through integrated floodplain management, and **LifeLineMDD**<sup>184</sup> aimed to restore ecological connectivity. Other key projects include **LifeLogos4Waters**<sup>185</sup>, focusing on natural water retention, and **LIFE Living Rivers**<sup>186</sup>, which supports the implementation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Danube River Basin Management Plan. **Optain**<sup>187</sup> targets water retention and reuse in agricultural catchments, **Revital I**<sup>188</sup> supports revitalisation of the abandoned Soltvyno salt mine in **Ukraine** with an overarching view to prevent the further pollution of the Upper-Tisza Basin, and **SaveGreen**<sup>189</sup> supports the protection of ecological corridors. **Tidy UP**<sup>190</sup> addressed plastic pollution in the Tisza River and the Danube River. EUSDR PA 4 involved representatives of these projects in its SG meetings and stakeholder conferences. Furthermore, the **re-use and/or transfer of knowledge** was promoted to **support good policy making. Efforts for capitalisation and common usage of results and outcomes among projects** were made.

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<sup>176</sup> Financing water projects online brochure completed. [Online](#).

<sup>177</sup> Water Success Stories 2020-2022 brochure completed. [Online](#).

<sup>178</sup> Letters of Recommendation of EUSDR PA 4. [Online](#).

<sup>179</sup> Clean Danube. [Online](#).

<sup>180</sup> Dalia. [Online](#).

<sup>181</sup> Danube Hazard M3C. [Online](#).

<sup>182</sup> Deepwater-CE. [Online](#).

<sup>183</sup> IDES. [Online](#).

<sup>184</sup> lifelineMDD. [Online](#).

<sup>185</sup> LIFE Logos 4 Waters. [Online](#).

<sup>186</sup> Living Rivers. [Online](#).

<sup>187</sup> OPTAIN. [Online](#).

<sup>188</sup> REVITAL I. [Online](#).

<sup>189</sup> SAVEGREEN. [Online](#).

<sup>190</sup> TID(Y)UP. [Online](#).



## PA 5 Environmental Risks

### **Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework**

In 2022-2023, EUSDR PA 5 accomplished several notable milestones in the fields of **flood-protection, prevention, disaster management and climate change adaptation**.

One of EUSDR PA 5's achievements was the successful fulfilment of the DAREFFORT<sup>191</sup> project, which strengthened regional cooperation in flood forecasting. Following this success, EUSDR PA 5 initiated an agreement with the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) and the EU Joint Research Centre (EU JRC) to ensure the Danube Forecasting Forum <sup>192</sup>(DAFF) will be held biannually. Based on this agreement, the 2023 edition of DAFF was organised in Budapest, HU, focusing exclusively on flood forecasting and fostering dialogue among stakeholders across the Danube Region. Moving forward, the 2025 edition of DAFF will be organised by the ICPDR and the EU JRC, continuing this vital platform for collaboration and knowledge exchange in flood risk management.

EUSDR PA 5's work on **nature-based solutions for flood risk reduction** was particularly influential, resulting in a Danube Strategy Flagship<sup>193</sup>. In addition, EUSDR PA 5 contributed to **the development of strategic documents** and hosted several workshops aimed at promoting **sustainable practices in floodplain management**. EUSDR PA 5's activities **demonstrated the added value of a macro-regional approach to disaster management and environmental resilience**, proving that many of these results would not have been achieved without the coordinated efforts under the EUSDR. The strategic added value lies in **enhancing disaster management collaboration, facilitating project development, and building partnerships**. Through organising meetings and workshops, **knowledge-sharing among stakeholders is promoted**, improving disaster preparedness and response. The proactive development of project proposals on environmental risks showcases a forward-looking approach to risk mitigation. Additionally, partnership-building enables **leveraging resources and expertise**, while capacity-building efforts support technically sound projects aligned with regional goals.

EUSDR PA 5 played a key role in fostering collaboration among the Danube Region member states through its **Disaster Management Working Group (DMWG)**<sup>194</sup>. The group made substantial progress by finalising various projects, including the **DiMaND**<sup>195</sup>, **PROFOUND**<sup>196</sup> and **DARenet**<sup>197</sup> projects, which **improved regional disaster preparedness and response**. These projects **significantly contributed to the regional infrastructure for disaster risk management**, integrating transnational cooperation and innovative approaches to disaster response. These initiatives collectively **strengthen cooperation, secure funding, and address environmental challenges effectively in the Danube Region**.

EUSDR PA 5, in close cooperation with the ICPDR and EUSDR PA 4, plays a key role in implementing coordinated policies and actions, as highlighted in the "Joint Paper on Cooperation and Synergy for the EUSDR Implementation <sup>198</sup>" (2014), focusing on improving water quality, enhancing flood risk

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<sup>191</sup> DAREFFORT. [Online](#).

<sup>192</sup> DAFF. [Online](#).

<sup>193</sup> Nature-based solutions for flood risk reduction. [Online](#).

<sup>194</sup> Disaster Management Working Group. [Online](#).

<sup>195</sup> DiMaND. [Online](#).

<sup>196</sup> PROFOUND. [Online](#).

<sup>197</sup> DARENET. [Online](#).

<sup>198</sup> Joint Paper on Cooperation and Synergy for the EUSDR Implementation [Online](#).

management, and addressing environmental risks across the Danube Region. The added value of EUSDR PA 5 during the 2022-2023 period is reflected in its **successful coordination of flood protection, flood prevention, disaster management and climate change adaptation** efforts across the Danube Region. By fostering collaboration through projects like DiMaND, PROFOUND, and DAREnet, it **enhanced regional disaster preparedness and response infrastructure**. Its work on flood risk reduction, including nature-based solutions, and partnerships with key organisations like the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR)<sup>199</sup> and the EU Joint Research Centre (JRC)<sup>200</sup>, **strengthened regional cooperation on environmental risks**. Through strategic initiatives, workshops, and project development, EUSDR PA 5 demonstrated the importance of a coordinated macro-regional approach to addressing disaster management and resilience.

### **Policy development**

Policy development under the EUSDR PA 5 reflected a concerted effort to align with European Union priorities, such as the European Green Deal. The **focus on green infrastructure and climate resilience** was prominent throughout the activities. As a result, the **Policy recommendation to support the uptake of nature-based practices paper**<sup>201</sup> was published in 2023, advocating for environmentally friendly approaches in flood risk reduction. This policy work reflected the growing recognition of nature-based solutions within the Danube Region, positioning them as vital components in the broader efforts to mitigate climate change impacts. EUSDR PA 5 also supported the **development of a macro-regional disaster management framework** in collaboration with the DAREnet project. This resulted in the report **Towards a Macro-Regional Disaster Management Framework in the Danube Region**<sup>202</sup>, which included eleven policy recommendations aimed at enhancing **cooperation between volunteers and government agencies during disaster responses**. The policy recommendations were designed to improve operational **collaboration in cross-border and regional settings**, promoting a more **integrated approach to managing disasters**. The initiatives and strategic documents produced by EUSDR PA 5 during 2022-2023 supported not only the objectives of the EUSDR but also **the shaping of policies at the national, transnational and European level**. The activities **provided a foundation for future policy innovations and strengthened disaster risk governance across the Danube Region**.

### **Projects and processes – implementation & funding**

EUSDR PA 5 implemented and supported a wide range of projects during the 2022-2023 period, funded through various EU programmes such as Horizon 2020, LIFE, IPA, and Interreg. Funding opportunities were **promoted and discussed** with SG members and relevant stakeholders. Completed projects of EUSDR PA 5 in the Danube Region focused on disaster response and environmental risk management, such as **SafeForest**<sup>203</sup>, which developed flood forecasting systems, **WACOM**<sup>204</sup>, which improved transboundary cooperation for pollution and flood risks, **DiMaND**<sup>205</sup> on disaster management networking, **PROFOUND**<sup>206</sup> on unified flood response, **DAREnet**<sup>207</sup> on flood response networking, and **SAFETISZA**<sup>208</sup>, which strengthened cross-border flood prevention. Ongoing projects include **LIFE**

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<sup>199</sup> International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River. [Online](#).

<sup>200</sup> EU Joint Research Centre. [Online](#).

<sup>201</sup> Policy Recommendation to support the uptake of nature-based practices. [Online](#).

<sup>202</sup> Towards a macro-regional disaster management framework in the Danube Region, Report. [Online](#).

<sup>203</sup> Improving Floodplain Forest Management along the Danube in the HU-SRB-CBC area – SafeForest. [Online](#).

<sup>204</sup> WACOM. [Online](#).

<sup>205</sup> DiMaND. [Online](#).

<sup>206</sup> PROFOUND. [Online](#).

<sup>207</sup> DARENET. [Online](#).

<sup>208</sup> SAFETISZA. [Online](#).

**SandBoil**<sup>209</sup> for flood risk mitigation, **FloodUZH**<sup>210</sup> for disaster prevention, **MYRIAD-EU**<sup>211</sup> for multi-risk management, **SpongeCity**<sup>212</sup> for urban climate adaptation, **SAFETY4TMF**<sup>213</sup> for tailings management, **RESTORIVER**<sup>214</sup> for climate adaptation of riversides, **LOCALIENCE**<sup>215</sup> for community disaster response, **DIRECTED**<sup>216</sup> for extreme event management, **NBS4LOCAL**<sup>217</sup> for integrating nature-based solutions, **PLOTO**<sup>218</sup> for resilient inland waterways infrastructure, and **BeReady**<sup>219</sup> for addressing urban heat islands. Planned projects like **WETNUBE** focus on wetland restoration, **MISSION4PANNON** on regional climate management, **InDiMaND** on disaster adaptation, **DanubeLight** on regional support, and **RISKHUB II**<sup>220</sup> on disaster preparedness between Slovenia and Hungary. In the period 2022-2023, EUSDR PA 5 has issued **14 Letters of Recommendation** (project proposal) and **4 Letters of Merit** (ongoing project)<sup>221</sup>. Moreover, EUSDR PA 5 has been working on the elaboration and implementation of 17 projects altogether. These ongoing projects are particularly valuable for the ICPDR and have been referenced in the Danube Flood Risk Management Plan<sup>222</sup> (DFRMP). Additionally, EUSDR PA 5 has been actively involved in the development and implementation of at least 17 projects, as mentioned above.



## PA 6 Biodiversity, Landscapes and Air & Soil Quality

### Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework

In 2022-2023, EUSDR PA 6 made substantial progress in **addressing biodiversity and environmental preservation across the Danube Region**. A major milestone was **initiating the establishment of the Danube WILDisland Ramsar Regional Initiative**, which aims to **protect natural river islands as part of Europe's Green and Blue Infrastructure**. Supported by multiple countries and the ICPDR, this initiative underscored the strength of transnational collaboration, particularly **in restoring river dynamics and natural hydrological regimes, further advancing the Danube Region's ecological corridors**. Through strategic partnerships, policy development, and community-driven action, EUSDR PA 6 sets a model for addressing environmental challenges while enhancing governance structures. EUSDR PA 6 contributed to the EU's Horizon Europe Mission **"Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030"**<sup>223</sup> through the **DANUBE4all**<sup>224</sup> project. This project aims to **restore freshwater ecosystems across the Danube River Basin** through a collaborative process involving scientists, policymakers, local communities, and the business sector. Community engagement was also a key focus, with over 1 500 volunteers participating in 2022 in Danube River preservation efforts through the **Danube Volunteers Day**. Additionally, the Danube Sturgeon Task Force made significant steps in preserving the sturgeon

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<sup>209</sup> LIFE SandBoil. [Online](#).

<sup>210</sup> FloodUZH. [Online](#).

<sup>211</sup> MYRIAD. [Online](#).

<sup>212</sup> Spongecity. [Online](#).

<sup>213</sup> SAFETY4TMF. [Online](#).

<sup>214</sup> RESTORIVER. [Online](#).

<sup>215</sup> LOCALIENCE. [Online](#).

<sup>216</sup> Directed Project. [Online](#).

<sup>217</sup> Nbs4local. [Online](#).

<sup>218</sup> PLOTO. [Online](#).

<sup>219</sup> Be Ready Project. [Online](#).

<sup>220</sup> RISKHUB II. [Online](#).

<sup>221</sup> PA 5 Letter of Recommendation. [Online](#).

<sup>222</sup> Danube Flood Risk Management Plan Update 2021: ANNEX 2. [Online](#)

<sup>223</sup> EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters. [Online](#).

<sup>224</sup> DANUBE4all. [Online](#).

population, launching the **LIFE Boat 4 Sturgeons**<sup>225</sup> project, which aims to **release over 1.6 million sturgeons by 2030**. Through broad stakeholder involvement and strategic task forces, EUSDR PA 6 ensured the widespread alignment and dissemination of the objectives of the EUSDR, fostering impactful regional conservation and governance. In addition, EUSDR PA 6 played a pivotal role in enhancing multi-level governance within the EUSDR, advocating for clearer stakeholder roles and capacity-building to improve the effectiveness of regional governance efforts. In alignment with these efforts, EUSDR PA 6 developed a **comprehensive policy report on Biodiversity cross-cutting issues through Priority Areas of the European Strategy for the Danube Region**<sup>226</sup> co-financed by the Interreg DRP. To support capacity-building efforts within EUSDR PA 6, a **Guide for Management and Soft Skills**<sup>227</sup> was developed to strengthen leadership.

The strategic added value primarily derived from the **extensive engagement of a diverse range of stakeholders** across the entire Danube Region, including **associations, civil society, scientific communities, and governmental authorities**. This broad involvement is strategically facilitated through the EUSDR PA 6 Task Forces, which leverage an expansive, issue-specific network. This approach ensures the **widespread dissemination and alignment of the EUSDR's objectives and implementation, fostering a comprehensive and inclusive regional impact**. Contributing to the **Danube Region Invasive Alien Species Network (DIAS)**, the **Hungarian and English book "Invasive animal species in Hungary"**<sup>228</sup> was prepared and published in 2022 by the Hungarian National Coordination.

### Policy development

EUSDR PA 6 plays an essential role in the green transition, focusing primarily on **nature conservation and biodiversity**. Its initiatives and activities are **directly aligned with European frameworks** such as the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, the Natura 2000 network, the Water Framework Directive, and **international agreements** like the Bern Convention. By design, EUSDR PA 6 operates in a way that allows it to contribute to these frameworks while **remaining responsive to shifts in policy priorities**. Furthermore, the efforts of EUSDR PA 6 are dedicated to **fostering connections between local and regional actions and European priorities**. Through its **Task Forces**, which bring together diverse stakeholders from the scientific community, civil society, and governmental authorities, EUSDR PA 6 ensures that its **activities are both comprehensive and participatory**. One notable achievement highlighting the influence of EUSDR PA 6 in international and multilateral agreements is the joint declaration on **"Achieving functional biodiversity in the Danube-Carpathian Region by mainstreaming ecological connectivity"**<sup>229</sup>, developed and endorsed by the Carpathian Convention, ICPDR, and EUSDR PA 4, PA 5, and PA 6, in July 2022. This joint declaration on biodiversity serves as an example of EUSDR PA 6's **growing influence in policy discussions**. However, achieving broader policy changes and legislative recognition requires a concerted effort from all actors within the EUSDR, and a robust multi-level governance approach.

### Projects and processes – implementation & funding

EUSDR PA 6 has been successful in **leveraging existing funding mechanisms** such as Horizon Europe, LIFE, and the Interreg Danube Region Programme. Funding opportunities were **promoted and discussed** with the SG members and relevant stakeholders. Moving forward, EUSDR PA 6 **advocates**

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<sup>225</sup> LIFE-Boat 4 Sturgeon. [Online](#).

<sup>226</sup> Biodiversity cross-cutting issues through Priority Areas of the European Strategy for the Danube Region, Policy Report, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>227</sup> PA 6 Files. [Online](#).

<sup>228</sup> Invasive Animal Species in Hungary, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>229</sup> Achieving functional biodiversity in the Danube-Carpathian Region by mainstreaming ecological connectivity. [Online](#).

**for closer alignment between EUSDR priorities and funding programmes** to ensure the long-term sustainability of its initiatives. Several projects received support from EUSDR PA 6 during the period 2022-2023, such as the Danube Strategy Flagship **Danubeparks LIFE Wild Islands**<sup>230</sup>, which is a **transnational conservation initiative** funded through the LIFE Programme. It involves multiple countries across the Danube Region and focuses on the **preservation of wild islands along the Danube River**. Another important project is **LIFE Danube Free Sky**<sup>231</sup>, also funded by the LIFE Programme, which targets the **transnational conservation of bird species along the Danube River** by implementing measures such as installing **bird-friendly technologies on power lines** and **monitoring endangered species**. In terms of aquatic biodiversity, EUSDR PA 6 supported the **WePass2**<sup>232</sup> project, which explores the technical and ecological feasibility of creating fish migration pathways at the Iron Gates dams. The **We Pass 2** project is designed to make the **Iron Gates dams passable for the endangered Danube sturgeon by conducting a feasibility study**.

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<sup>230</sup> DANUBEPARKS Wild Islands. [Online](#).

<sup>231</sup> Danube Free Sky. [Online](#).

<sup>232</sup> We Pass 2. [Online](#).

### 3.3. Pillar 3 – Building Prosperity in the Danube Region

The Danube Region was often referred to as the most heterogeneous European macro-region. Countries participating in the EUSDR experience significant differences as regards innovation, information society, competitiveness, education, labour market and marginalised communities. Therefore, the Priority Areas dedicated to building prosperity in the Danube Region aim at improving the cooperation across the Region by jointly developing projects and processes for improving social and economic framework conditions. As a result of the long-term coordinated activities of stakeholders, notable achievements were obtained in stimulating excellence in research and development, strengthening the cooperation between knowledge providers, boosting the transnational cooperation between innovation and business, making use of the potential of the labour force and fighting poverty.



#### PA 7 Knowledge Society

##### **Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework**

During 2022-2023, EUSDR PA 7, focusing on Knowledge Society, achieved significant progress through various innovative projects and collaborations. One of the main achievements was the **continued organisation of multilateral scientific and technical cooperation (MSTC) calls**<sup>233</sup>, which aimed to **foster joint research projects and mobility among scientists from Danube Region countries**. These initiatives strengthened **cross-border research cooperation, boosted research capacity development, and provided the opportunity for young/female researchers to cooperate in an international setting and to develop their scientific careers**. EUSDR PA 7 actively supported Danube Strategy Flagships, such as the **Danube Tech Valley Initiative (DTVI)**<sup>234</sup>, which serves as **an inclusive platform for accelerating innovation potential** through cross-border interactions between diverse stakeholders, including local and regional governments, research institutes and universities, start-ups and corporations. Furthermore, EUSDR PA 7 focused on promoting scientific excellence and collaboration across the Danube Region. Another achievement was the **Danubius Young Scientist Awards**<sup>235</sup>, which is open to all scientific disciplines. In 2022, the awards received 112 applications, resulting in 14 winners—one from each EUSDR country—recognising outstanding contributions to scientific research. EUSDR PA 7 has supported research also by boosting public awareness via online events that highlighted key scientific achievements in the Danube Region. These streams, covering topics like water quality and space research, emphasised science's role in tackling real-world challenges. One notable achievement was the preparation of a comprehensive study based on a survey of RIS3 implementation, covering **challenges, achievements, monitoring, evaluation, thematic platforms, macro-regional S3 partnerships, and the impact of COVID-19 on RIS3**. The cooperation between EUSDR PA 7 and EUSDR PA 4 contributed to promoting water protection through educational activities and cooperation with EUSDR PA 8 continued to support innovation.

The strategic added value of EUSDR PA 7 activities lies in **promoting a smarter Danube Region by increasing visibility and participation of Danube Region scientists in EU funding mechanisms,**

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<sup>233</sup> Multilateral Scientific and Technological Cooperation. [Online](#).

<sup>234</sup> Danube Tech Valley Initiative. [Online](#).

<sup>235</sup> Danubius Award. [Online](#).

**fostering stronger cooperation in science and innovation, and aligning the Region with the European Research Area.** The role of EUSDR PA 7 in facilitating such large-scale, cross-disciplinary initiatives highlighted the importance of the EUSDR in bringing together diverse stakeholders to address shared goals.

### **Policy development**

Through organised events and stakeholder engagement, EUSDR PA 7 has facilitated information sharing on funding opportunities. Notably, the **Western Balkans Info Hub Policy Answers**<sup>236</sup> Danube Strategy Flagship has played a key role in **fostering innovation and research cooperation between EU member states and the Western Balkan countries.** Danube Strategy Flagships such as RIS4DANU and DTVI have further strengthened the EUSDR PA 7's role in **aligning local and regional initiatives with European political priorities.** EUSDR PA 7 has been active in addressing **social challenges related to digitalisation, inequality, and demographic changes.** It also contributed to events such as the EUSDR conference **"Towards a Knowledge-Driven Society and professions of the future"**<sup>237</sup>, organised under the SI EUSDR PCY, in May 2023. The activities of EUSDR PA 7 helped bridge local, regional, national and European policy objectives by facilitating dialogue between national research bodies and EU policymakers, **ensuring that regional needs are reflected in broader EU frameworks.** In terms of policy influence, the **objectives of EUSDR PA 7 have been included in the Slovak Partnership Agreement and Operational Programme Slovakia,** ensuring alignment with national priorities. The policy development efforts of EUSDR PA 7 were geared towards aligning research and innovation (R&I) activities with the **European Research Area (ERA)** and other **EU policy priorities,** such as the **green and digital transition.** The initiative to raise awareness about **Horizon Europe opportunities** played a key role in guiding stakeholders from the Danube Region to understand the benefits of **EU R&I funding mechanisms.**

### **Projects and processes – implementation & funding**

EUSDR PA 7 has contributed to the **green, digital, and societal transformations** by supporting project development within European grant schemes. Throughout 2022-2023, EUSDR PA 7 was involved in implementing and supporting a range of projects funded through EU mechanisms such as Horizon Europe, Interreg, and national programmes. One key project was the **Danube Tech Valley Initiative (DTVI),** which sought to foster innovation by **building a network of researchers, start-ups, and policymakers.** Another important initiative was the **Multilateral Danube Call,** which repurposed bilateral funding instruments into a multilateral framework, allowing researchers from AT, SK, CZ, RS, and BG to cooperate on projects that improve research activities in the Danube Region. EUSDR PA 7 also coordinated the **Western Balkans Info Hub,** a Horizon Europe project that focused on integrating the Western Balkans into the European Research Area by providing policy recommendations and fostering innovation. The project underscored the commitment of EUSDR PA 7 to ensure that all Danube Region member states can access EU research funding and capacity-building opportunities. Additionally, EUSDR PA 7's collaboration with national authorities in SK led to discussions on embedding the EUSDR priorities within national funding programmes, ensuring that future research projects related to smart cities and health innovation could be supported. A notable development in 2023 were EUSDR PA 7's activities in supporting the submission of proposals under **Horizon Europe's Widening Participation and spreading excellence programme,** which aimed to reduce the gap in R&I performance between economically stronger and less developed regions. Moreover, EUSDR PA 7

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<sup>236</sup> Western Balkans R&I Information Hub. [Online.](#)

<sup>237</sup> Conference: Towards knowledge-driven society and professions of the future. [Online.](#)

demonstrated its unique value through its Danube Strategy Flagships, such as **RIS4DANU**<sup>238</sup>, which targeted on **transitioning old industrial sites into innovation hubs**, thus addressing the Danube Region's ecological, social, and economic challenges.



## PA 8 Competitiveness of Enterprises

### **Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework**

The achievements of EUSDR PA 8 in the period 2022-2023 reflect a concerted effort to address critical thematic areas including **innovation, technology transfer, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, female entrepreneurship and bioeconomy**. Through six active Working Groups (WGs), EUSDR PA 8 has fostered an environment favourable to networking, project development, and the alignment of policies across the Danube Region. For example, the newly established Working Group on Circular Bioeconomy focuses on supporting SMEs in adopting sustainable practices, particularly by developing new business models aimed at securing regional raw material supplies and enhancing climate neutrality among SMEs. In addition to these efforts, EUSDR PA 8 has taken steps to ensure **active participation of youth** through the DYC, enhancing intergenerational dialogue and promoting awareness of entrepreneurial opportunities. The collaboration with other EU MRS, such as EUSAIR, reflects EUSDR PA 8's commitment to cross-MRS cooperation and knowledge exchange, enhancing the overall impact of the EUSDR. Notably, the response to challenges posed by geopolitical issues, such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, highlights the adaptive nature of EUSDR PA 8, commissioning studies that offer valuable insights and recommendations for resilience in supply chains. EUSDR PA 8 has published several studies and thematic papers, including an analysis of EUSDR PA 8's implementation and future project proposals, a promotional video, and the study **Development of two new flagship projects including studies** examining the current economic situation in the Danube Region with an emphasis on **circular bioeconomy** and **the impact of AI on enterprise solutions**. Additionally, the Danube Transfer Center (DTC) Network<sup>239</sup>, established in 2012, celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The DTC Network continued to serve as a hub for technology transfer and innovation, supporting SMEs in their innovation and technology needs.

The added value of EUSDR PA8 lies in significant enhancement of transnational cooperation across key areas, effectively implementing the actions set for improving competitiveness among enterprises in the Danube Region. Macro-regional cooperation among EUSBSR, EUSDR, and EUSAIR, was enhanced while also collaboration with different EUSDR PAs was strengthened. Additionally, the emergence of topics related to bioeconomy and circular economy has led to the creation of a dedicated Working Group, enabling targeted and continuous implementation of relevant actions. This dynamic approach supports sustainable economic growth and innovation in the Region.

### **Policy development**

Throughout 2022-2023, EUSDR PA 8 focused on influencing policy development, particularly in areas related to **bioeconomy, digitalisation, and innovation**. The creation of the Circular Bioeconomy Working Group underscored the commitment of PA 8 to **aligning policies that promote sustainable development**. The group's activities involved **examining the legislative frameworks in all Danube**

<sup>238</sup> RIS4Danu. [Online](#).

<sup>239</sup> Danube Transfer Center (DTC) Network. [Online](#).

**Region countries**, addressing the multi-sectoral nature of bioeconomy, and encouraging cooperation among stakeholders across various sectors. To facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration, EUSDR PA 8 has organised a series of events and thematic workshops that brought together policymakers, academic institutions, and business support organisations. Notable are the **High-Level Conference on the Future of the Danube Region: Green Transition and Circular Bioeconomy – Enhancing the Competitiveness of Enterprises – Sustainability, Climate neutrality, Raw material supply and New business models**<sup>240</sup>, organised in September 2023, in Zagreb, HR, the **Danube Region at the Turn of the Times – Economic policy impulses from the EU Strategy for the Danube Region**<sup>241</sup> in July 2022, in Ulm, DE, and the **Danube Region at the turn of times - Actively Shaping the Transformation**<sup>242</sup>, in July 2023, in Stuttgart, DE. These events brought together **policymakers, academics, businesses, and industries from across the Danube Region to share best practices, challenges, and regulatory frameworks for enhancing competitiveness**. The series of online thematic events, such as the one dedicated to insect biorefineries, illustrates EUSDR PA 8's commitment to disseminating cutting-edge research and fostering collaboration among different communities. Another key achievement in policy development was the publication of thematic studies, such as the **Short Study on the Current Economic Situation of the Danube Region with a Focus on Circular Bioeconomy**<sup>243</sup> in 2022, which provided valuable insights for support schemes and mechanisms supporting value chain development. Additionally, PA 8 continued to **foster policy dialogues**, organising workshops and publishing papers on technology transfer and social innovation. In 2022, four policy papers were published: **Interregional Analysis of COVID-19 impact on SME internationalisation**<sup>244</sup> UpGradeSME (Interreg Europe) – SME Internationalisation; **Mapping of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social economy ecosystems and policies**<sup>245</sup> Social Seeds (Interreg Europe) – Social Innovation/Social Entrepreneurship; **Mapping of new social enterprise development policies and programmes in the partner regions/countries**<sup>246</sup> Social Seeds (Interreg Europe) – Social Innovation/Social Entrepreneurship; **Second Chance Entrepreneurship Community Strategy for the Danube Region**<sup>247</sup> Danube Chance 2.0 (Interreg DTP) – Re-start of SMEs. Access to the knowledge and results generated by various projects was facilitated, to promote the transfer of knowledge. The re-use and/or transfer of knowledge was promoted, to support policy making. The **new Hungarian Cluster Strategy (2023-2030) was adopted** and with reference to the relevant EUSDR PA 8 Action, the Hungarian **national coordination financed the translation of the document to English**. This allows the exchange of knowledge among the relevant experts in the Region.

### **Projects and processes – implementation & funding**

Regular updates regarding EU funding programmes have been shared with stakeholders to facilitate access to financial resources necessary for project implementation. EUSDR PA 8 was highly active in **securing funding and implementing various projects** through multiple sources, including Horizon Europe, Interreg, and other EU-managed programmes. Moreover, the strategic emphasis on Danube Strategy Flagships, such as the **Danube Alliance**<sup>248</sup> for better resilience of value chains in the Danube Region and the **Danube Transfer Centre Network**<sup>249</sup>, underscores the commitment of EUSDR PA 8 to

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<sup>240</sup> Conference on the Future of the Danube Region, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>241</sup> Conference: The Danube Region at the Turn of Times, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>242</sup> Conference: The Danube Region at the Turn of Times, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>243</sup> Short Study on the current economic situation of the DANUBE REGION with focus on circular bioeconomy, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>244</sup> Interregional Analysis of COVID-19 impact on SME internationalisation. [Online](#).

<sup>245</sup> Mapping of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social economy ecosystems and policies. [Online](#).

<sup>246</sup> Mapping of new social enterprise development policies and programmes in the partner regions/countries. [Online](#).

<sup>247</sup> Second Chance Entrepreneurship Community Strategy for the Danube Region. [Online](#).

<sup>248</sup> Danube Alliance for SME Competitiveness. [Online](#).

<sup>249</sup> Danube Transfer Center Network. [Online](#).

strengthening the competitiveness of SMEs across the Danube Region. These Danube Strategy Flagships aim to promote **cooperation, knowledge transfer, and the implementation of innovative technologies**. EUSDR PA 8 provided support for projects. BrAIIn was approved for financing in 2023. One of the PA 8 Danube Strategy Flagships which is still ongoing is **Plan-C**<sup>250</sup>, aimed to **transform the plastics value chain in the Danube Region** by promoting transnational cooperation among plastics processors, producers, and the machine industry. Another relevant Danube Strategy Flagship of PA 8, **WE.Circular**<sup>251</sup>, focuses on enhancing the digital and industrial capacities of female entrepreneurs in the Danube Region. The project **BrAIIn**<sup>252</sup>, focusing on integrating artificial intelligence into SMEs, further showcases the proactive approach of EUSDR PA 8 in equipping businesses with the tools necessary for the future. EUSDR PA 8 also played a significant role in facilitating access to funding by regularly updating stakeholders on available EU funding programmes and open calls. In 2023, EUSDR PA 8 was actively involved in the design of the Interreg Seed Money Facility Call, which was designed to support projects with a strong macro-regional focus, offering up to EUR 300 000 in EU contributions per EUSDR PA. This was a clear example of EUSDR PA 8's efforts to streamline funding processes and support project development across the Region.



## PA 9 People & Skills

### Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework

In 2022-2023, EUSDR PA 9 made significant progress in promoting social inclusion, labour market policies, education, and vocational training in the Danube Region. The organisation of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Stakeholder Conferences in 2022 and 2023 brought together stakeholders from across the Danube Region to address **socio-economic challenges, including the impacts of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic**. These conferences highlighted the **strength of collaboration within the EUSDR framework**, allowing participants to **share knowledge on education and labour market initiatives**. EUSDR PA 9 also strengthened **school cooperation by organising two eTwinning conferences, leading to the development of 19 school projects**, and the cooperation within the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE)<sup>253</sup>, promoting VET excellence and social inclusion. Additionally, the **Danube Region Monitor**<sup>254</sup>, an evidence-based tool for **tracking labour market and education trends**, was updated in 2022. A key achievement was coordinating the **EUSDR ESF Managing Authority Network**<sup>255</sup> in cooperation with EUSDR PA 10, which **aligns policies and facilitates projects on labour market inclusion, education, and training**. The successful completion of the **SI PLUS**<sup>256</sup> project, focusing on **the implementation of National Competence Centres for Social Innovation in the frame of ESF+**, was followed by a new transnational initiative in 2023.

### Policy development

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<sup>250</sup> PA 8 Flagship project 2024: PLAN C. [Online](#).

<sup>251</sup> PA 8 Flagship project 2024: WE.Circular. [Online](#).

<sup>252</sup> PA 8 Flagship project BrAIIn. [Online](#).

<sup>253</sup> Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence. [Online](#).

<sup>254</sup> Danube Region Monitor. [Online](#).

<sup>255</sup> EUSDR ESF Network. [Online](#).

<sup>256</sup> Social Innovation Plus – Competence Centres (SI PLUS), Factsheet. [Online](#).

In 2022-2023, EUSDR PA 9 fostered the cooperation with platforms like the **Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)**<sup>257</sup>, one of the Danube Strategy Flagships. Another EUSDR PA 9 key initiative is the **Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE)**, launched in 2021 in partnership with the **European Training Foundation (ETF)**. This platform **promotes vocational excellence, focusing on green skills and social inclusion**. EUSDR PA 9 also made significant contributions to labour and education policies in the Danube Region, notably by **updating the Danube Region Monitor** in 2022, **providing data on labour market trends to support policy decisions**. A major initiative addressed **the green and digital transitions**, with a focus on **integrating green skills into vocational education**. The CoVE platform has been instrumental in promoting these efforts, and the dialogue on skills for the green and digital transition will be continued during the future conferences. In 2023, a survey was launched among policy platform members to further strengthen the Platform as a relevant initiative in this field. As a result of the survey, the thematic focus on green energy and green construction was selected for future events. EUSDR PA 9 also focused on **social inclusion**, particularly by addressing **the integration of vulnerable groups into the labour market**. The transnational approach, supported by EU funds such as ESF+ and EaSI, has **strengthened regional cooperation on socio-economic issues**. Through the organisation of workshops, conferences and other events, PA 9 aims to raise awareness about actions and solutions implemented within the framework of projects addressing the Danube Region. These efforts show opportunities and give impulses for scaling up and transferring these projects and initiatives.

### **Projects and processes – implementation & funding**

Key funding instruments within EUSDR PA 9 are the Interreg DRP, ESF+ and Erasmus+, as well as national and regional cohesion programmes. Additionally, there have been efforts to promote complementary funding sources, as exemplified by **the Seed Money Facility Call**<sup>258</sup> webinar held in December 2023, which engaged stakeholders in the education and labour sectors. Existing embedding tools, such as the **EuroAccess**<sup>259</sup> newsletters on funding opportunities, have been regularly used, with calls being published on the EUSDR PA 9 website and shared among SG members. Projects aligned with EUSDR PA 9 actions and targets, funded through various EU mechanisms such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and national funding programmes, were actively supported by EUSDR PA 9. Projects like **RESET**<sup>260</sup> reflect EUSDR PA 9's commitment to **fostering sustainability in the Region through education and vocational training**. Relevant projects are **"Increasing the quality of work-based learning by strengthening vocational practice coordinators"**<sup>261</sup>, the **DigiUp 4.0**<sup>262</sup> project which aims to upskill young people in digital skills, and the **SI PLUS** project, focused on employment and social innovation. Another key project is **EQET SEE**<sup>263</sup> which enhances education quality in South-Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. The **Inclusive Education in the Region Odesa**<sup>264</sup> project highlights the role of education in UA while the **COOP-NET**<sup>265</sup> project focuses on Centres of Vocational Excellence in MD. Furthermore, projects like **Back on Track**<sup>266</sup> and **IDEAL**<sup>267</sup>, dedicated to **digital learning**,

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<sup>257</sup> Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE). [Online](#).

<sup>258</sup> Seed Money Facility Call. [Online](#).

<sup>259</sup> EuroAccess. [Online](#).

<sup>260</sup> Renewable Energy Services in Education and Training RESET Project. [Online](#).

<sup>261</sup> New OeAD regional project: Improving the quality of in-company learning. [Online](#).

<sup>262</sup> Upskilling of young people's digital skills to counteract the shortage of skilled workers in Industry 4.0. [Online](#).

<sup>263</sup> EQET SEE. [Online](#).

<sup>264</sup> OeAD Educational Cooperation with Ukraine. [Online](#).

<sup>265</sup> New OeAD project Coop-Net in the Republic of Moldova. [Online](#).

<sup>266</sup> Back on Track. [Online](#).

<sup>267</sup> IDEAL. [Online](#).



completed under Erasmus+ KA2 funding, are also noteworthy. Access to the knowledge and results generated by these projects was facilitated, to promote the transfer and dissemination of knowledge.

### 3.4. Pillar 4 – Strengthening the Danube Region

The Danube Region countries share the goal of improving the functioning of democratic institutions, public administrations and national, regional and local organisations to provide a safer and more secure environment for their citizens. To reach this goal, EUSDR PAs initiated joint actions aiming to ensure better political, civil and administrative structures, to improve the multi-level governance mechanisms, to facilitate the administrative cooperation of the cross-border communities, as well as to fight against corruption and organised crime. Effective coordinated planning, financing and implementation of measures contributed to the achievement of important steps for overcoming the main bottlenecks identified in the Danube Region.



#### PA 10 Institutional Capacity & Cooperation

##### Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework

In September 2022, EUSDR PA 10 initiated a policy discussion **on enhancing cross-border public services**<sup>268</sup>, guided on the ESPON Targeted Analysis “Cross-border Public Services 2.0”. This led to the identification of **cross-border emergency healthcare as a critical area** for cross-border and macro-regional coordination, resulting in the **establishment of the Task Force for Cross-border Emergency Healthcare**<sup>269</sup>. The Task Force, comprising EUSDR PA 10 SG members and healthcare experts, addresses challenges such as legal agreements, language barriers, medical equipment, and data exchange by **supporting existing cross-border healthcare initiatives and fostering mutual learning and cooperation**. In parallel, the **development of a cross-MRS network for smart communities, SMART ERA**<sup>270</sup>, has been established in 2023. The **EUSDR ESF+ managing authorities network**<sup>271</sup>, led by EUSDR PAC 9 and PAC 10 with ESF+ Austria, has continued to focus on embedding the EUSDR into cooperation programmes. In July 2022, the network convened in Vienna to **explore potential topics for transnational coordination and cooperation**, contributing to a **more cohesive and aligned approach to macro-regional development**.

The activities under the framework of EUSDR PA 10 foster **permanent cooperation** and the **creation of information networks** that enable an environment conducive to **project development aligned with strategic objectives**. These networks, including initiatives like the Danube Participation Days, National Participation Days, civil society organisations (CSOs) and cooperation networks in DE/BW, **pool relevant knowledge essential for achieving these objectives**. A key added value is exemplified in the Cross-border Emergency Healthcare Task Force, which **systematically identifies knowledge gaps and tracks progress in cross-border healthcare** by **coordinating a diverse range of stakeholders** — public and private, on a national and regional level — while **ensuring the development of comprehensive, well-coordinated approaches** to cross-border emergency healthcare.

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<sup>268</sup> How to tackle obstacles for cross-border public services. [Online](#).

<sup>269</sup> Cross-border Emergency Healthcare Danube Region. [Online](#).

<sup>270</sup> Smart Villages – Kicking off cross-macro-regional cooperation. [Online](#).

<sup>271</sup> EUSDR ESF Network. [Online](#).

## Policy development

The EUSDR ESF MA Network actively contributes to **advancing social policy** across the Danube Region, aligning with the EU's strategic goals for a fair and just transition<sup>272</sup>. This collaboration ensures that **state-of-the-art social policies are implemented, addressing the Region's unique needs**. The cross-MRS network for Smart Communities<sup>273</sup>, known as **SMART ERA**, supports the **digital transition in rural areas while promoting green and social transformation** through smart approaches. By engaging local authorities at the macro-regional level, SMART ERA aims to **mitigate brain-drain, foster digital skills, and enhance services tailored to citizens' needs**, contributing to a more inclusive and sustainable future in rural communities across the Danube Region and other macro-regions in Europe. In 2023, the **10<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day (DPD)**<sup>274</sup> focused on **Ukraine's and the Republic of Moldova's EU enlargement process**, exploring how the countries can **embrace European values in their green and social transitions**. Overall, these initiatives reflect a **coordinated effort to advance European policies in the Danube Region**, strengthening the role of local stakeholders in social, digital, and green transitions, and **ensuring that policies are shaped by the needs and contributions of both civil society and public authorities**.

## Projects and processes – implementation & funding

The **Young Bled Strategic Forum (Young BSF)**<sup>275</sup>, organised annually by EUSDR PA 10, addresses key objectives of the PA, particularly enhancing civil society and local actor involvement (Action 7) and fostering cooperation between state and non-state actors (Action 6). As part of the larger Bled Strategic Forum (BSF), it **creates an open space for dialogue** among decision-makers, academics, media, NGOs, young leaders, and other stakeholders. Through discussions, roundtables, and networking, **the forum promotes cross-border and cross-sector cooperation** for young participants. The activities of the **Danube Participation Day (DPD)**<sup>276</sup> are coordinated and implemented by EUSDR PA 10 on an annual basis, with the support of institutional partners and the respective EUSDR PCY and directly contributing to the advancement of the EUSDR PA 10 Actions 1, 6 and 7. The DPD showcases **examples of macro-regional cooperation** and the **role of civil society**, and serves as a **platform for sharing initiatives, discussing the needs and opportunities** for civil society, and providing targeted training to enhance project management skills among local actors. In the project **“Support to Planning, Programming, and Coordination for EU Financial Assistance”** (IPA funded)<sup>277</sup> the focus is to help Montenegro **efficiently manage EU integration and pre-accession assistance**, accelerating its EU membership preparations. The project's purpose is to support the **development and operationalisation of the strategic framework for accession assistance** and **create a pipeline of projects** eligible for funding under IPA III and other development partners. Additionally, the **SMART ERA project**<sup>278</sup> has been established in 2023. Stakeholders from the Alpine Region (EUSALP) reached out to EUSDR PA 10, EUSAIR PA Innovation, and EUSBSR to **collaborate on promoting smart communities** across all the EU MRS. The project, submitted to the Horizon Programme and set to start in January 2024, builds on the experience of Austrian partners in smart villages, aiming to roll out the approach across the Danube Region and beyond.

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<sup>272</sup> Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region. [Online](#).

<sup>273</sup> Smart Communities. [Online](#).

<sup>274</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>275</sup> Young Bled Strategic Forum 2021. [Online](#).

<sup>276</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>277</sup> Montenegro – financial assistance under IPA. [Online](#).

<sup>278</sup> SMART ERA. [Online](#).



## PA 11 Security

### Main achievements and unique implementation through the EUSDR framework

In 2022/2023, EUSDR PA 11 demonstrated a robust engagement from its SG members and stakeholders, bolstered by strong political support for further strategic development in **SG meetings**<sup>279</sup>, an **on-site thematic event**, an online kick-off meeting with the DYC, and an on-site **Ministerial Conference where Ministerial Conclusions were adopted**. A thematic event in October 2022 focused on **enhancing police cooperation to improve security and combat serious and organised crime** in EUSDR member states. The conference attracted around 90 participants from nine countries and Europol, featuring 11 expert presentations on topics such as **new technologies and funding opportunities for tackling mobile organised crime groups** (MOCGs). Furthermore, experts in border control participated in online meetings alongside the **Joint Expert Group on Administrative Processes with EUSDR PA 1a**<sup>280</sup>. Additionally, two **DARIF Annual Operations**<sup>281</sup>, initiated by the Hungarian Ministry of Interior, took place in 2022 and 2023, involving ten EUSDR member states. A key strategic achievement during the period of 2022 and 2023 was the **establishment of excellent working relations between the EUSDR PA 11 PAC teams and the respective EUSDR PCIES**. This collaboration not only fostered **stronger partnerships** but also **ensured alignment of priorities and programmes**, enhancing the overall effectiveness and coherence of the Strategy's implementation. Such relationships facilitated the seamless exchange of information and resources, contributing significantly to the progress and development of strategic initiatives within the framework of the EUSDR.

The EUSDR PA 11 cooperation framework provides significant added value by **demonstrating continuous support across all levels of the Strategy** – administrative, scientific, expert, and operational. This comprehensive engagement ensures that diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making processes, enhancing the effectiveness of initiatives. Furthermore, the **high participation rate of involved states** in the Danube Region fosters a collaborative environment that **strengthens regional cooperation and collective action**. This framework not only promotes **knowledge sharing and best practices** but also **builds mutual trust among stakeholders**, ultimately driving progress towards common objectives in the EUSDR.

### Policy development

EUSDR PA 11 Security acknowledges the **critical significance of the EU's green, digital, and social transition policies, actively integrating these themes into the political agenda**. These priorities have been consistently featured in the participated Joint NC/PAC meetings, where efforts were made to **convey the key messages** to SG members in the follow-up. EUSDR PA 11 positioned the EUSDR as a **vital forum for regional cooperation in Europe and works** to connect it with other regional initiatives, such as the **Police Cooperation Convention**<sup>282</sup> and the **Salzburg Forum**<sup>283</sup>, **enhancing collaboration**

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<sup>279</sup> PA 11 Steering Group. [Online](#).

<sup>280</sup> Joint PA 1a & PA 11 Working Group on Administrative Processes. [Online](#).

<sup>281</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> DARIF Operation. [Online](#).

<sup>282</sup> Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe Secretariat. [Online](#).

<sup>283</sup> Salzburg Forum. [Online](#).

and policy coherence across these platforms. This strategic approach demonstrates EUSDR PA 11's commitment to fostering effective regional partnerships and advancing key policy objectives.

### **Projects and processes – implementation & funding**

The **DARIF project**<sup>284</sup>, central to EUSDR PA 11's work, has proven to be an **effective tool for practical cooperation among stakeholders**. An **online survey**<sup>285</sup> was introduced to build on the results of previous Joint Operations. EUSDR **PA 11 cooperates with EUSDR PA 1a in the Joint Action Plan**<sup>286</sup>, including the **territorial extension of the IBISweb database**, the **creation of a transnational platform for control bodies**, and the **establishment of a single point of contact for problem management in Danube shipping**. Although plans for a **joint meeting of water police forces** were disrupted by the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, significant progress was made in the implementation of these measures. The **Danube Commission**<sup>287</sup> will serve as the **point of contact for feedback management** related to border and nautical controls, integrating a contact form on its website for streamlined communication. Additionally, PA 1a successfully **introduced DAVID forms**<sup>288</sup> **for border control** across HU, HR, RS, RO, BG, MD, and UA, **receiving positive feedback from the shipping sector**. The **launch of the Transnational Electronic Registration and Time Management Tool (TERM)** was initiated through a **joint working group**, aiming to **enhance registration procedures** with a win-win approach for the shipping industry.

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<sup>284</sup> Setting up the Structure of a Danube River Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>285</sup> The DARIF on-line study. [Online](#).

<sup>286</sup> PA 1a & PA 11 Working Group on Administrative Processes, Flyer. [Online](#).

<sup>287</sup> Danube Commission. [Online](#).

<sup>288</sup> Introduction of the harmonised DAVID forms along the Danube successfully completed. [Online](#).

## 4. Implementation and Activities across EUSDR Priority Areas

In addition to the developments and achievements outlined in chapter 3, strategic frameworks and activities across individual EUSDR PAs are also a key component of the successful implementation of the EUSDR. The following chapters address horizontal activities, capitalisation, the Steering Groups and governance structure, cooperation with EUSDR core stakeholders and other stakeholders as well as the strategic policy development.

### 4.1. Horizontal Activities

The revised EUSDR Action Plan (2020)<sup>289</sup> identifies three horizontal frameworks, which are relevant for the five strategic objectives and to be implemented in all EUSDR PAs: 1) Digitalisation, 2) Migration and Demographic Change, 3) Climate Change and Sustainable Development. On a thematic level, table 5 provides an overview on how the EUSDR horizontal frames were addressed in the EUSDR PAs. The DSP continuously supported the initiation and implementation of horizontal activities in the respective EUSDR PAs, for example by attending events that address the horizontal frameworks and by providing support in organising and implementing them.

Table 5: EUSDR Priority Areas' contributions to EUSDR horizontal frames

PA	Digitalisation	Migration and Demographic Change	Climate Change and Sustainable Development
<b>PA 1a</b>	Digitalisation of administrative border control procedures within the joint Working Group of PA 1a and PA 11 on administrative processes <sup>290</sup> .	n/a	Action 1 addresses climate change impacts on the Danube waterway by developing nature-based, climate-resilient solutions. Action 2 focuses on sustainable fleet modernisation, aiming for a greener, zero-emission fleet by 2050.
<b>PA 1b</b>	PA 1b consistently supports the development and adoption of new technologies and innovative approaches in transport and mobility. Digitalisation remains a daily focus, with progress in the EU and the Danube Region regularly discussed in meetings and events.	n/a	PA 1b consistently supports sustainable transport infrastructure and services, with a focus on climate change adaptation. Since 2017, PA 1b has promoted resilient infrastructure planning that considers the Danube Region's geomorphology. PA 1b also endorses the use of eco-friendly construction materials and practices that reduce pollution and support the circular economy.
<b>PA 2</b>	PA 2 has embraced digital content creation, launching the interactive portal DESTINE <sup>291</sup> , which centralises key information on sustainable energy, including an interactive web-map for data visualisation. In 2022, PA 2 also developed an e-learning material with five modules, guiding users through geothermal heating	n/a	Enhancing renewable energy use, including as a substitute for imported gas, will balance the energy mix in participating countries and reduce fossil fuel dependency through improved energy efficiency. The adoption of alternative energy carriers like hydrogen and local green-energy initiatives will aid decarbonisation and foster a green economy in the Danube Region. PA 2 also minimises the

<sup>289</sup> EUSDR Action Plan, 2020. [Online](#).

<sup>290</sup> Joint PA 1a & PA 11 Working Group on Administrative Processes. [Online](#).

<sup>291</sup> DESTINE. [Online](#).

PA	Digitalisation	Migration and Demographic Change	Climate Change and Sustainable Development
	project development <sup>292</sup> , complete with interactive Q&A sections.		environmental impact by favouring webinars over in-person meetings and opting for low-footprint services when physical meetings are necessary.
<b>PA 3</b>	n/a	n/a	n/a
<b>PA 4</b>	Digital platforms support joint research, innovation, and knowledge exchange, facilitating collaborative projects and data sharing. The widespread adoption of online meetings has proven useful, though in-person interactions still hold value for building stronger, more comfortable relationships. Additionally, digitalisation has paved the way for artificial intelligence, offering significant benefits to humanity.	Globalisation has led to increased international migration, particularly from structurally evolving to structurally advanced regions and countries. Economic opportunities and demographic changes have created a demand for foreign workers in the Danube Region. This migration has both positive and negative impacts on the labour market, requiring careful policy management. Effective migration governance necessitates coordinated efforts across various sectors and levels of government. The Danube River Basin, with its unique geographical and demographic characteristics, faces specific challenges related to migration. To address these challenges, it is crucial to attract skilled migrants, promote social integration, invest in human capital development, strengthen regional cooperation, and implement sustainable development policies.	PA 4 has focused on climate change mitigation and adaptation within Pillar 2. Key activities include the publication of a brochure on sustainable agriculture practices in the Danube Region <sup>293</sup> and the organisation of a conference to discuss adapting to climate change impacts on water resources <sup>294</sup> . These efforts contribute to addressing climate change challenges and promoting sustainable development in the Region.
<b>PA 5</b>	PA 5 recognised the importance of digitalisation as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Online meetings were adopted to reduce the carbon footprint. However, PA 5 also acknowledged the value of in-person meetings for certain discussions. This balanced approach ensured effective communication and collaboration within the PA.	PA 5 helped individuals affected by migration and demographic changes, including those impacted by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. This demonstrated PA 5's commitment to humanitarian aid. PA 5 emphasised the importance of cooperation between EUSDR member states in responding to these challenges. The Disaster Management Working Group <sup>295</sup> served as a positive example of regional cooperation.	PA 5 recognised the significance of climate change and sustainable development within the context of the European Green Deal <sup>296</sup> . Climate change was acknowledged as a horizontal topic within PA 5, with actions and targets closely related to Pillar 2. Projects such as LIFE-MICACC <sup>297</sup> , LIFE LOGOS 4 WATERS <sup>298</sup> , RISKHUB <sup>299</sup> , and RISKHUB II <sup>300</sup> are examples of efforts aimed at reducing the side effects of climate change and protecting the environment within the PA 5 framework.
<b>PA 6</b>	n/a	n/a	A Report <sup>301</sup> reflecting synergies and cooperation across EUSDR PAs with EUSDR PA 6, key areas of cooperation and good practices related to preservation of biodiversity, landscape, soil and air quality, was published in 2022. The horizontal

<sup>292</sup> Greening district heating in the Danube Region. [Online](#).

<sup>293</sup> Brochure about Green Agriculture. [Online](#).

<sup>294</sup> EUSDR Conference on Adapting to Climate change in relation to WATER in Budapest. [Online](#).

<sup>295</sup> Disaster Management Working Group. [Online](#).

<sup>296</sup> The European Green Deal. [Online](#).

<sup>297</sup> LIFE MICACC. [Online](#).

<sup>298</sup> LIFE LOGOS 4 WATERS. [Online](#).

<sup>299</sup> RISKHUB. [Online](#).

<sup>300</sup> RISKHUB II. [Online](#).

<sup>301</sup> Biodiversity cross-cutting issues through Priority Areas of the European Strategy for the Danube Region, 2022. [Online](#).

PA	Digitalisation	Migration and Demographic Change	Climate Change and Sustainable Development
			linking of activities, processes, and projects was supported through direct contact with other EUSDR PAs through PA Networks, as well as through direct engagement with EUSALP Action Group 7, focusing on ecological connectivity.
<b>PA 7</b>	Digitalisation and topics related to AI are being discussed at the level of the PA 7 SG, and in cooperation with PA 8. They are topics of interest of new project cooperation.	The PA 7 WG focused on higher education and mobilities has provided help and support to Ukraine, particularly for Ukrainian students, teachers, researchers, and scientists.	PA 7 addresses climate change and sustainable development primarily through its capitalisation strategy and collaboration with PA 4. Danube Strategy Flagships like RIS4DANU <sup>302</sup> aim to facilitate a social-sustainable-technological transition in the Region. PA 7 is also working with PA 4 to raise awareness of these topics, particularly water quality, through online streaming, lectures, and new project development.
<b>PA 8</b>	The PA 8 WG – DIGITAL DANUBE <sup>303</sup> focuses on bringing together regional and transnational stakeholders to generate new digital business models, products, processes, or services. The revised EUSDR Action Plan <sup>304</sup> includes an action dedicated to establishing an innovative digital ecosystem to support SMEs. The Interreg Projects DECIDE <sup>305</sup> and WE.Circular <sup>306</sup> are closely linked to PA 8 and aim to boost digital and industrial capacity for sustainable circular transition, particularly for women entrepreneurs. Both projects have been awarded as Danube Strategy Flagships.	n/a	Climate Change and Sustainability are cross-sectoral issues addressed by all PA 8 Working Groups. Topics like the European Green Deal <sup>307</sup> , circular economy, bioeconomy, resource and energy efficiency are becoming increasingly important. Environmental issues are considered in meeting planning and document sharing to minimise printing. Social and economic aspects are also taken into consideration by project partners. In September 2023, the Working Group Circular Bioeconomy <sup>308</sup> was formed to support enterprise competitiveness. This Working Group focuses on circular economy and provides support to find new business models for raw material supply and sustainability.
<b>PA 9</b>	COVID-19 boosted digitalisation, making it a key topic for PA 9. PA 9 addressed digitalisation in relation to the labour market, skills, education, and media literacy. PA 9 also raised awareness of the importance of digital skills for the green and digital transition at EUSDR meetings. Digitalisation will remain a key topic in the future, with the PA 9 Stakeholder Conference <sup>309</sup> and a thematic workshop on the digitalisation of the	The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and its impact on the labour market in the Danube Region are duly considered.	PA 9 focuses on labour market and education policy, with a particular emphasis on green skills. The Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence <sup>311</sup> is a key initiative in this area. Sustainability will remain a key topic in the future, including at the PA 9 Stakeholder Conference.

<sup>302</sup> RIS4DANU. [Online](#).

<sup>303</sup> WG – DIGITAL DANUBE. [Online](#).

<sup>304</sup> EUSDR Action Plan, 2020. [Online](#).

<sup>305</sup> DECIDE. [Online](#).

<sup>306</sup> WE.Circular. [Online](#).

<sup>307</sup> The European Green Deal. [Online](#).

<sup>308</sup> Working Group – Circular Economy and Bioeconomy. [Online](#).

<sup>309</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> International Stakeholder Conference of PA 9. [Online](#).

<sup>311</sup> Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence. [Online](#).

PA	Digitalisation	Migration and Demographic Change	Climate Change and Sustainable Development
	public employment service <sup>310</sup> focusing on this area.		
<b>PA 10</b>	The SMART ERA <sup>312</sup> project will promote smart community development in the Danube Region. It emphasises participatory planning and decision-making through digital tools and services.	PA 10 primarily focuses on societal issues, particularly migration and demographic change. These topics are integrated into various activities, including network cooperation, discussions, project proposals, and humanitarian responses. PA 10 collaborates with young generations and civil society to address demographic challenges and promote inclusive policymaking.	PA 10 integrates discussions on climate change and sustainable development into its activities. Experts from these fields participate in events like the Danube Participation Day <sup>313</sup> and Young Bled Strategic Forum <sup>314</sup> . PA 10 also collaborates with networks and projects where its expertise can contribute.
<b>PA 11</b>	All SG meetings during the reporting period were implemented in an on-line environment with the cooperation of the DSP.	n/a	n/a

## 4.2. Capitalisation

EUSDR member states build on the outcomes of EUSDR PA activities to further develop their policies. Capitalisation is therefore an essential component of cooperation to **generate long-term learning, overcome challenges, and promote sustainable and integrated development**. In the reporting period 2022-2023, EUSDR PAs mainly focused on capitalising on project/process outcomes to enhance regional policies. Efforts were made to integrate previous results into new initiatives, foster cross-regional collaboration, and support evidence-based decision-making. Key activities included addressing critical regional challenges, disseminating findings through various platforms, and ensuring that knowledge from past projects/processes informed ongoing and future activities. Figure 27 demonstrates how results of projects and activities were used to further develop the respective PAs and their policy implementation. In 2022/2023, there was no dedicated capitalisation strategy of programmes and/or the Strategy available that would align the objectives of the funding programmes and the actions of the EUSDR.

<sup>310</sup> Thematic Workshop “Digitalisation of the Public Employment Service and the Labour Market Administration”. [Online](#).

<sup>312</sup> SMART ERA. [Online](#).

<sup>313</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>314</sup> Young Bled Strategic Forum. [Online](#).

## How were the results of projects and activities used to further develop the PA and its policy implementation?

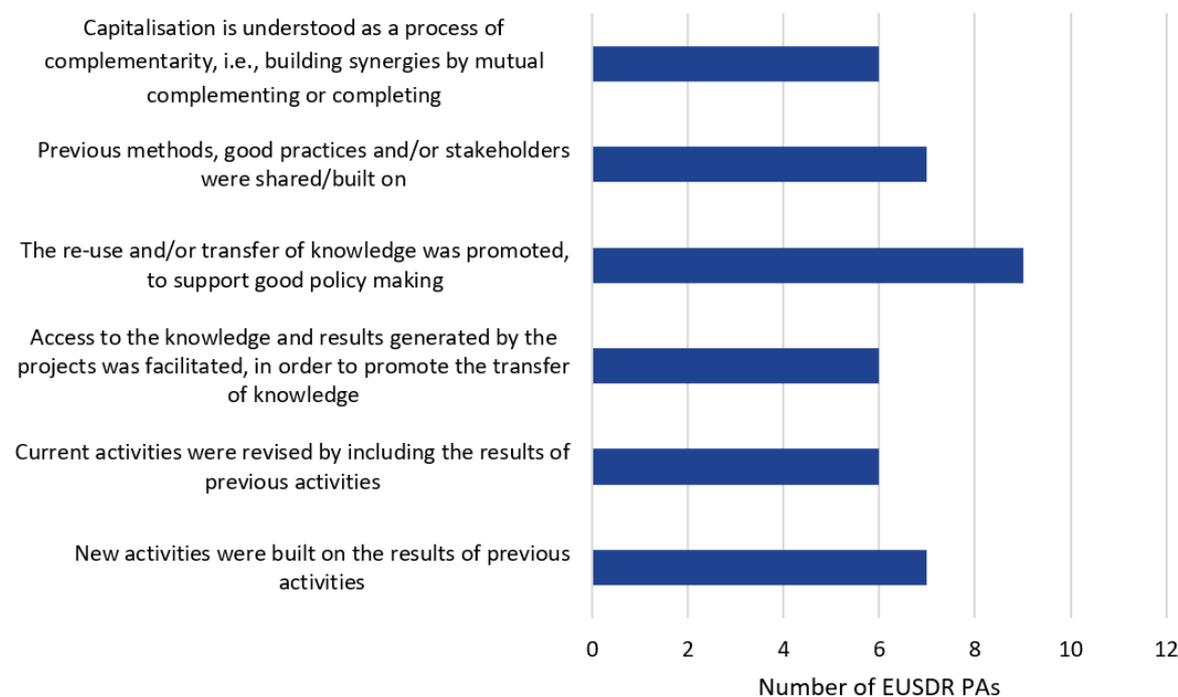


Figure 26: Capitalisation of results in the EUSDR PAs (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

The following capitalisation activities were pursued in the individual EUSDR PAs:

In **PA 1a**, the FAIRway Danube<sup>315</sup> project results informed National Action Plans on fairway rehabilitation, which contributed to the Danube Ministerial meeting conclusions in June 2022<sup>316</sup>.

After the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, **PA 2** focused on reducing the Danube Region's dependency on Russian gas. They conducted a study<sup>317</sup> on this issue and shared findings through workshops and forums in 2022. The discussion on phasing out gas continued into 2023, expanding to other EU MRS. Future plans include follow-up studies and a gas market visualisation tool. PA 2 also emphasised capitalising on past projects, leading to the development of new initiatives like HyEfre<sup>318</sup> and StoreMore<sup>319</sup>, aimed at advancing renewable energy and storage solutions in the Region.

Within the framework of **PA 4**, the previous Interreg DTP Capitalisation Strategy<sup>320</sup> strengthened connections between related projects by grouping them into Thematic Poles, allowing them to leverage each other's achievements for greater impact. This ongoing process enhanced knowledge management, contextualised results, and turned achievements into

<sup>315</sup> FAIRway Danube. [Online](#).

<sup>316</sup> Danube Ministerial meeting conclusions on effective waterway infrastructure rehabilitation and maintenance on the Danube and its navigable tributaries, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>317</sup> Phasing out Russian gas in the Danube Region, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>318</sup> HyEfre. [Online](#).

<sup>319</sup> StoreMore. [Online](#).

<sup>320</sup> DTP Capitalisation Strategy Handbook, 2018. [Online](#).

lasting values. Project representatives collaborated through PA 4 events to share and capitalise on outcomes.

**PA 5** built on previous projects to develop new initiatives, ensuring continuity in addressing environmental risks and disaster management in the Danube Region. By sharing findings and promoting knowledge transfer, PA 5 supported informed policymaking and evidence-based initiatives. This collaborative approach facilitated learning, the adoption of best practices, and the enhancement of disaster management capabilities.

**PA 7** maintained strong cooperation with its Danube Strategy Flagships. Project leaders regularly attended PA 7 SG meetings. Here, updates were shared and support for events and initiatives was sought.

Project results were widely disseminated through the **PA 8** webpages, major events, and SG meetings. They were also shared and discussed at Working Group meetings, which facilitated networking and project development. Additionally, results were communicated via newsletters and to SG members, who were encouraged to relay the information to their ministries and other stakeholders.

Within the framework of **PA 9**, the outcomes from the meeting on the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence<sup>321</sup> and a corresponding survey were conducted in 2022 and 2023 and used to further work on the concept of the platform. The sectoral focus of the meeting held in 2024 resulted out of the responses received on the survey, covering the main interests of the policy platform members. Furthermore, the updated Danube Region Monitor<sup>322</sup> was used to further develop PA 9 activities and within the EUSDR ESF Network<sup>323</sup>. Continuous exchange and interlinking of projects is ongoing.

In **PA 10**, the cross-MRS Network on Smart Communities<sup>324</sup> builds on EUSALP's Smart Villages and Smart Communities projects, guiding macro-regional policy implementation. Good practices from the EUSBSR and Danube Region ESF Programmes have been shared for consideration within the EUSDR ESF Network<sup>325</sup>. D-CARE Lab<sup>326</sup> results on social innovation and demographic change have been adapted in UA to develop social services.

In **PA 11**, the current Interreg DRP PAC project will support policy development through events linked to the revised EUSDR Action Plan<sup>327</sup>. Some events will build on previous projects, such as networking against false documents and terrorism.

During the development and implementation of activities, processes and/or projects, PAs focussed on **interlinking** them to achieve sustainable results. This can be achieved, for example, by setting common objectives related to activities, processes and/or projects within a PA, thereby creating synergies. Furthermore, activities, processes and/or projects can be interlinked between several PAs (within the EUSDR or even with other Thematical Areas of other EU MRS). The DSP supported cooperation between different EUSDR PAs based on needs elaborated through EUSDR evaluations and assessments

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<sup>321</sup> Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence. [Online](#).

<sup>322</sup> Danube Region Monitor. [Online](#).

<sup>323</sup> EUSDR ESF Network. [Online](#).

<sup>324</sup> Smart (Rural) Communities. [Online](#).

<sup>325</sup> Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region. [Online](#).

<sup>326</sup> D-CARELABS. [Online](#).

<sup>327</sup> EUSDR Action Plan, 2020. [Online](#).

by joint, interlinked activities, facilitating exchange between different EUSDR core and external stakeholders as well as by supporting collaborative processes/projects and events. Figure 27 demonstrates how PAs interlinked activities, processes and/or projects in the reporting period 2022-2023.

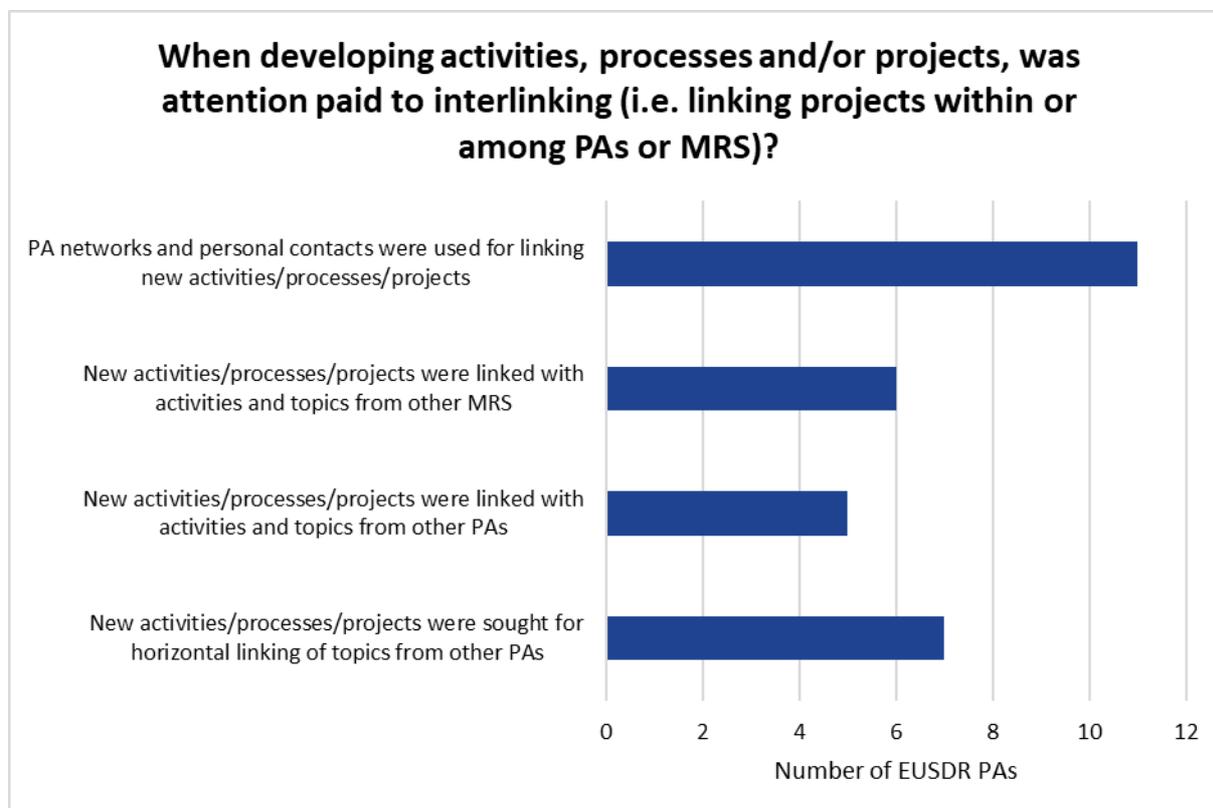


Figure 27: Interlinking of activities/processes and/or projects (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

Examples of interlinking projects, processes and/or projects within the EUSDR PAs include:

**PA 1a** participated in EUSBSR meetings, including a workshop focused on support measures for UA, particularly in educational infrastructure for nautical personnel. PA 1a also took part in the INTERACT MRS Transport Coordinators’ meeting<sup>328</sup> in 2023.

Within the framework of **PA 2**, discussions have begun on collaboration with PA 1a and PA 1b on hydrogen-fuelled transport and with PA 8 on a hydrogen economy. Cooperation with EUSALP on hydrogen valleys is ongoing, and conversations with EUSALP and EUSAIR are exploring the fossil fuel phase-out process, particularly regarding Russian natural gas.

**PA 6** has established direct contact with other EUSDR PAs through PA networks as well as with EUSALP Action Group 7 (Ecological Connectivity).

On 27 March 2023, the DSP facilitated a meeting between EUSDR **PA 4**, **PA 5** and **PA 6** and the DG MARE, unit A1 (Maritime Innovation, Marine Knowledge and Investment) to discuss on the updated EU Horizon Europe Mission “Restore our Oceans and Waters”<sup>329</sup> programme and possible links to and synergies with the EUSDR.

<sup>328</sup> Meeting of the EU MRS Transport Coordinators, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>329</sup> EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters. [Online](#).

**PA 7** has established strong cooperation with PA 4 and PA 8. PA 7 and PA 4 collaborate on promoting water quality from a research perspective and engaging the younger generation in water-related issues. Cooperation with PA 8 continues on topics like innovation support, women's participation in innovation, and S3 (Smart Specialisation Strategies).

New activities, processes, and projects within **PA 8** were linked with other PAs, particularly with PA 7, where representatives had the opportunity to present Danube Strategy Flagships at SG meetings, identifying potential joint activities. Experts or coordinators from other EU MRS Priority Areas/Thematic Groups were regularly invited to PA 8 conferences, events, and meetings. Additionally, some Working Group Coordinators moderated major EC events, further increasing the visibility of PA 8.

Since 2015, **PA 9**, together with PA 10, has established the EUSDR ESF Network<sup>330</sup>. The network partners have developed a common text module for transnational elements in national operational programmes and identified shared topics for transnational cooperation in the Danube Region. A joint workshop with the EUSBSR was held during the 2023 European Week of Regions and Cities<sup>331</sup>.

Within the framework of **PA 10**, cooperation opportunities among different PAs are identified and supported based on discussion topics and activities, fostering partnerships that promote development and prosperity in the Danube Region. For example, several projects, like the D-CARE Lab<sup>332</sup> (PA 9, PA 10) or the Talent Magnet<sup>333</sup> (PA 8, PA 9, PA 10) link topics across PAs.

**PA 11** has planned new activities jointly with PA 1a and aims to resume collaboration with PA 10 on human trafficking. In the future, PA 11 will utilise the EU Macro-regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days, organised by the EC/DG REGIO, to connect with coordinators from the other three EU MRS.

Another important component of successful implementation of activities, processes and/or projects is their transfer to other scalar and administrative levels, generating **leverage**. The results of the 2024 reporting demonstrate that the PAs have placed a significant focus on this aspect and have generated a leverage effect at regional, national and transnational level when implementing their activities, processes and/or projects (see Figure 28). This emphasises the integral importance of multi-level governance for the EUSDR.

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<sup>330</sup> EUSDR ESF Network. [Online](#).

<sup>331</sup> Workshop "Skills for the Future of European Macro-regions". [Online](#).

<sup>332</sup> D-CARELABS. [Online](#).

<sup>333</sup> TALENTMAGNET. [Online](#).

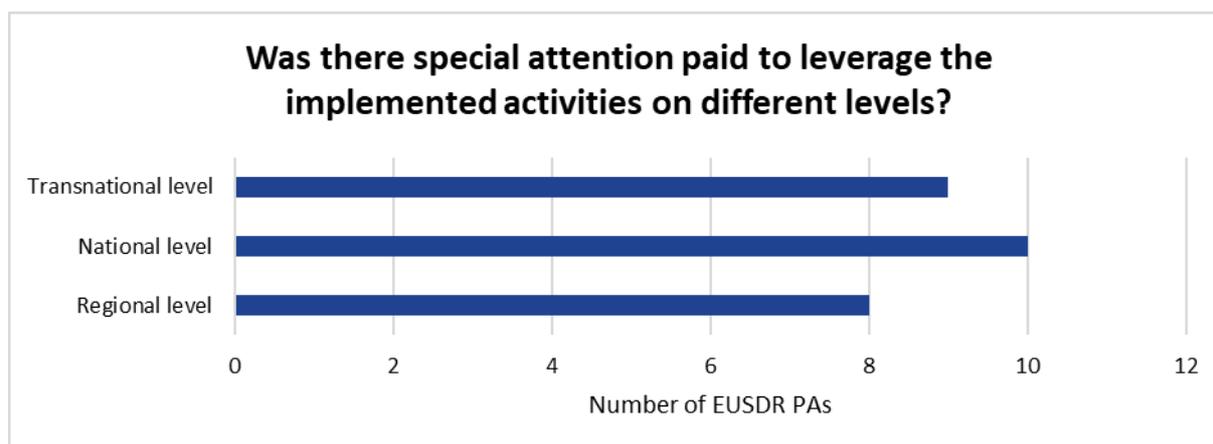


Figure 28: Leverage of implemented activities on different levels (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

In particular, the PAs have chosen the following approaches to leverage on further scalar and administrative levels:

Activities and results of **PA 1a** were presented at national and international events, including the Danube Business Talk <sup>334</sup>, Danube ministerial meetings, the Danube Tourism Conference<sup>335</sup>, and meetings of the Hydrotechnical Working Group.

Activities of **PA 2** were primarily focused on macro-regional (EUSDR) and EU-wide levels. PA 2 actively participated in events as an organiser or speaker to promote its work, including the European Sustainable Energy Week 2022<sup>336</sup>, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Fora<sup>337</sup>, EU MRS Week 2023<sup>338</sup>, and the EUSALP hydrogen workshop.

**PA 5** shared progress with water-related expert groups (e.g., with ICPDR on flooding, public participation, accidental pollution, and involving expert groups). Internal promotion was also emphasised within the SG and Disaster Management Working Group<sup>339</sup>. These platforms facilitated transnational sharing of implemented activities. PA 5 also participated in regional projects and shared information and results. It also participated in national-level events, sharing the results of its ongoing activities and progress.

**PA 8** organised events attracting regional and national policymakers, including high-level political decision-makers. These events, such as the visit of Baden-Württemberg State Secretary Mr Patrick Rapp in Zagreb, HR <sup>340</sup>, and the “Danube at the Turn of Times” conference<sup>341</sup> with four participating State Secretaries, significantly increased the visibility and political support for the EUSDR and PA 8. All events and activities were linked to regional, national, and transnational levels.

Activities of **PA 9** were linked to the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)<sup>342</sup>, the Central European Cooperation in Education and Training (CECE)<sup>343</sup>, the European

<sup>334</sup> Danube Business Talks. [Online](#).

<sup>335</sup> International Danube Navigation and Tourism Conference. [Online](#).

<sup>336</sup> European Sustainable Energy Week 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>337</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, 2022. [Online](#). & 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>338</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> EU MRS Week. [Online](#).

<sup>339</sup> Disaster Management Working Group. [Online](#).

<sup>340</sup> Documentation Circular Bioeconomy Event on Sept 21, 2023, in Zagreb. [Online](#).

<sup>341</sup> The Danube at the turn of times – actively shaping the transformation. Solution approaches for politics and business. [Online](#).

<sup>342</sup> Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE). [Online](#).

<sup>343</sup> Central European Cooperation in Education and Training (CECE). [Online](#).

Training Foundation (ETF)<sup>344</sup>, the EUSDR Annual Fora<sup>345</sup>, and national coordination platforms (e.g., in Austria).

**PA 10** actively sought synergies between different levels of engagement within the EUSDR. This includes sharing best practices, involving stakeholders from various levels, and promoting multi-level engagement in activities such as capacity building, events, and funding opportunities. The activities of PA 10 encompass transnational (Young Bled Strategic Forum<sup>346</sup>, Danube Participation Day<sup>347</sup>), national (National Participation Days<sup>348</sup>, capacity building on national levels), and local (empowering and networking within the Danube Local Actors Platform<sup>349</sup>) levels.

Within **PA 11**, outputs of thematic events are communicated to managerial staff at the national level and other experts to reach a wider audience. PACs encourage stakeholders to consider projects related to security in the Danube Region.

Another important component of capitalisation is the **dissemination of results** via various channels. As Figure 29 illustrates, in most PAs the SG members disseminated the results at the respective national levels. In addition, the results of almost all PAs were published on the respective webpages. In several cases, the results were promoted at events, shared among other EUSDR PAs and other EU MRS and sent out via newsletters. 5 out of 12 PAs also sent the results directly to the respective national line ministries and/or to the line DGs of the EC. Further examples of communicating the results of the PAs as well as the support provided by the DSP in communication-related activities can also be found in chapter 2.5 on Communication.

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<sup>344</sup> European Training Foundation. [Online](#).

<sup>345</sup> EUSDR Annual Fora. [Online](#).

<sup>346</sup> Young Bled Strategic Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>347</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>348</sup> National Participation Days. [Online](#).

<sup>349</sup> Danube Local Actors Platform. [Online](#).

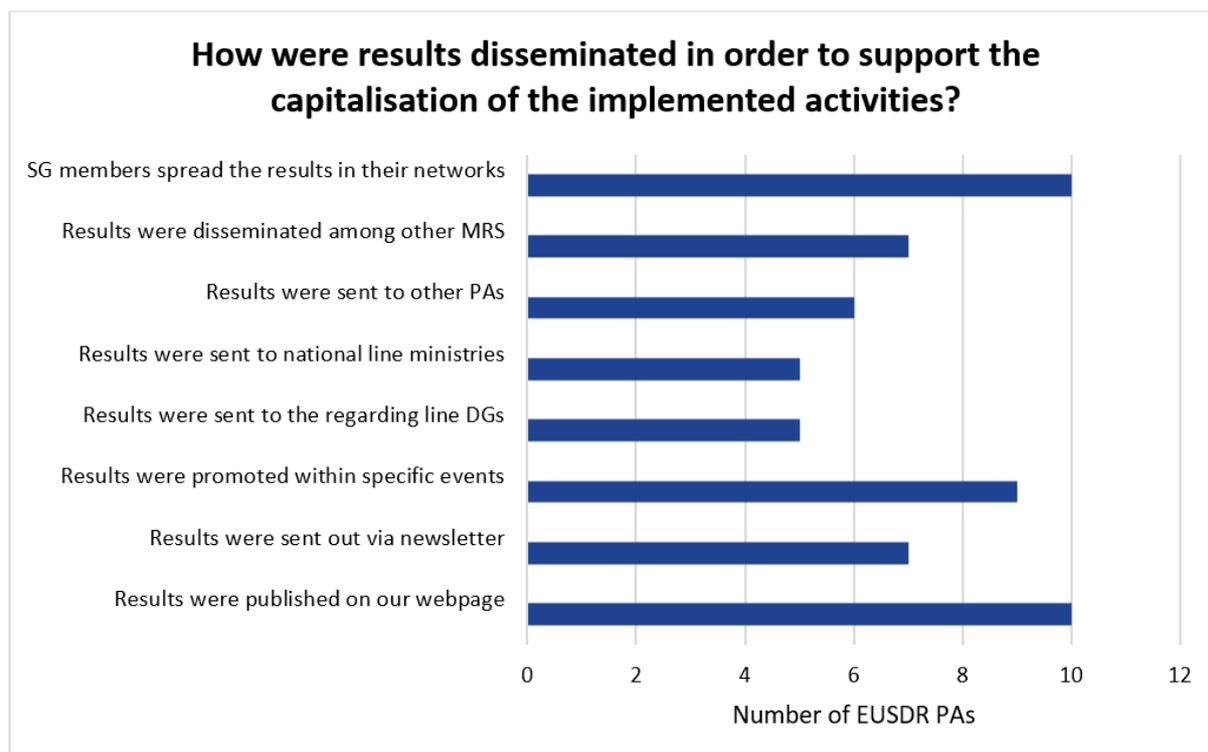


Figure 29: Dissemination of results (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

### 4.3. Steering Groups and Governance Structure

**Steering Groups (SGs)** are the central executive and decision-making bodies at EUSDR PA level regarding objectives, formats and emphases of cooperation and future developments. SG meetings allow representatives of all 14 EUSDR member states to discuss current developments in the respective PAs and make decisions on future activities. The DSP supports the PACs upon request in technically implementing the SG meetings and regularly thematically reports on current activities in the EUSDR (e.g., in the field of monitoring and evaluation, embedding, communication, capacity building and youth involvement) at the SG meetings. A total of 48 SG meetings were held in 2022 and 2023, as displayed in Table 6.

Table 6: List of Steering Group meetings in 2022 and 2023

PA	SG meeting	Date & Place	More information
PA 1a	21 <sup>st</sup> SG meeting	28 September 2022 online	<a href="https://navigation.danube-region.eu/steering-group">https://navigation.danube-region.eu/steering-group</a>
	22 <sup>nd</sup> SG meeting	5 December 2022 online	
	23 <sup>rd</sup> SG meeting	9 October 2023 Bucharest, RO	
PA 1b	25 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	5 May 2022 online	<a href="https://transport.danube-region.eu/steering-group">https://transport.danube-region.eu/steering-group</a>
	26 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	3-4 November 2022 Bled, SI	
	27 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	31 May 2023 Ljubljana, SI	
	28 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	18 December 2023 online	
PA 2	24 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	24 June 2022	

		online	
	25 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	23 November 2022 Budapest, HU	<a href="https://energy.danube-region.eu/steering-group">https://energy.danube-region.eu/steering-group</a>
	26 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	31 May 2023 online	
	27 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	28 November 2023 Budapest, HU	
<b>PA 3</b>	24 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	20 September 2022 online	<a href="https://cultureandtourism.danube-region.eu">https://cultureandtourism.danube-region.eu</a>
	25 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	9 November 2022 Timișoara, RO	
	26 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	13 December 2022 Sofia, BG	
	27 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	23 October 2023 Ljubljana, SI	
<b>PA 4</b>	23 <sup>rd</sup> SG meeting	17 May 2022 Bratislava, SK	<a href="https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/meetings/steering-group">https://waterquality.danube-region.eu/meetings/steering-group</a>
	24 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	22-23 November 2022 Budapest, HU	
	25 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	23-24 May 2023 Bratislava, SK	
	26 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	27 November 2023 Budapest, HU	
	Joint PA 4 & PA 5 Meeting	29 November 2023 Budapest, HU	
<b>PA 5</b>	21 <sup>st</sup> SG meeting	14 June 2022 Bucharest, RO	<a href="https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/steering-group-meetings">https://environmentalrisks.danube-region.eu/steering-group-meetings</a>
	22 <sup>nd</sup> SG meeting	22-23 November 2022 Budapest, HU	
	23 <sup>rd</sup> SG meeting	27 June 2023 Bucharest, RO	
	Joint PA 4 & PA 5 Meeting	29 November 2023 Budapest, HU	
<b>PA 6</b>	17 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	7 April 2022 online	<a href="https://nature.danube-region.eu">https://nature.danube-region.eu</a>
	18 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	21 April 2023 online	
	19 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	4 July 2023 online	
	20 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	6-7 November 2023 Kopačevo, HR	
<b>PA 7</b>	23 <sup>rd</sup> SG meeting	22 June 2022 online	<a href="https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/steering-group-meetings">https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/steering-group-meetings</a>
	24 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	6 December 2022 Belgrade, RS	
	25 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	1-2 June 2023 Bratislava, SK	
	26 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	27-28 November 2023 Maribor, SI	
<b>PA 8</b>	20 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	30 June 2022 Ulm, DE	<a href="https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/steering-group-meetings-2023">https://competitiveness.danube-region.eu/steering-group-meetings-2023</a>
	21 <sup>st</sup> SG meeting	14-15 November 2022 Stuttgart, DE	
	22 <sup>nd</sup> SG meeting	10 July 2023 Stuttgart, DE	
	23 <sup>rd</sup> SG meeting	21 September 2023 Zagreb, HR	
<b>PA 9</b>	22 <sup>nd</sup> SG meeting	10 June 2022 Vienna, AT	<a href="https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/past-events">https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/past-events</a>

	23 <sup>rd</sup> SG meeting	23 November 2022 online	
	24 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	14 June 2023 online	
	25 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	28 November 2023 online	
PA 10	22 <sup>nd</sup> SG meeting	31 May 2022 Vienna, AT	<a href="https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/priority-area-10-institutional-capacity-eu-danube-strategy/priority-area-10-steering-group">https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/priority-area-10-institutional-capacity-eu-danube-strategy/priority-area-10-steering-group</a>
	23 <sup>rd</sup> SG meeting	5-6 December 2022 Zagreb, HR	
	Extended SG meeting	28 February 2023 online	
	24 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	6-7 June 2023 Belgrade, RS	
	25 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	13-14 December 2023 Ljubljana, SI	
PA 11	21 <sup>st</sup> SG meeting	14 July 2022 online	<a href="https://security.danube-region.eu/steering-group">https://security.danube-region.eu/steering-group</a>
	22 <sup>nd</sup> SG meeting	22 November 2022 online	
	23 <sup>rd</sup> SG meeting	11 July 2023 online	
	24 <sup>th</sup> SG meeting	22 November 2023 online	

The effectiveness of EUSDR SGs depends on active **participation** and engagement of its members. PACs point out that SG members actively contributed to various initiatives, including shaping strategic projects, recruiting experts, identifying Danube Strategy Flagships<sup>350</sup>, and fostering strong cooperation with relevant stakeholders. Their efforts led to notable achievements such as increased participation, successful workshops, and the issuance of Letters of Recommendation.

However, PACs also point out that while some SG members are actively involved, others remain absent or inactive, due to various factors such as limited influence over appointments, complexity of topics, and travel restrictions. Therefore, some PACs highlight the need for a more active role of SG members in decision-making processes and suggest measures to improve their involvement, including capacity building, maintaining institutional memory, and stronger national commitment to the EUSDR.

Figures 30 and 31 display the average participation in SG meetings per EUSDR country and PA in 2022 and 2023. Generally, there are notable differences between the EUSDR countries in terms of their participation in SG meetings. SG members from DE, HU and AT show particularly high levels of participation. The country-specific differences are based on a variety of reasons, ranging from the provision of personnel resources to the political commitment towards the activities of the EUSDR PAs.

<sup>350</sup> Danube Strategy Flagships. [Online](#).

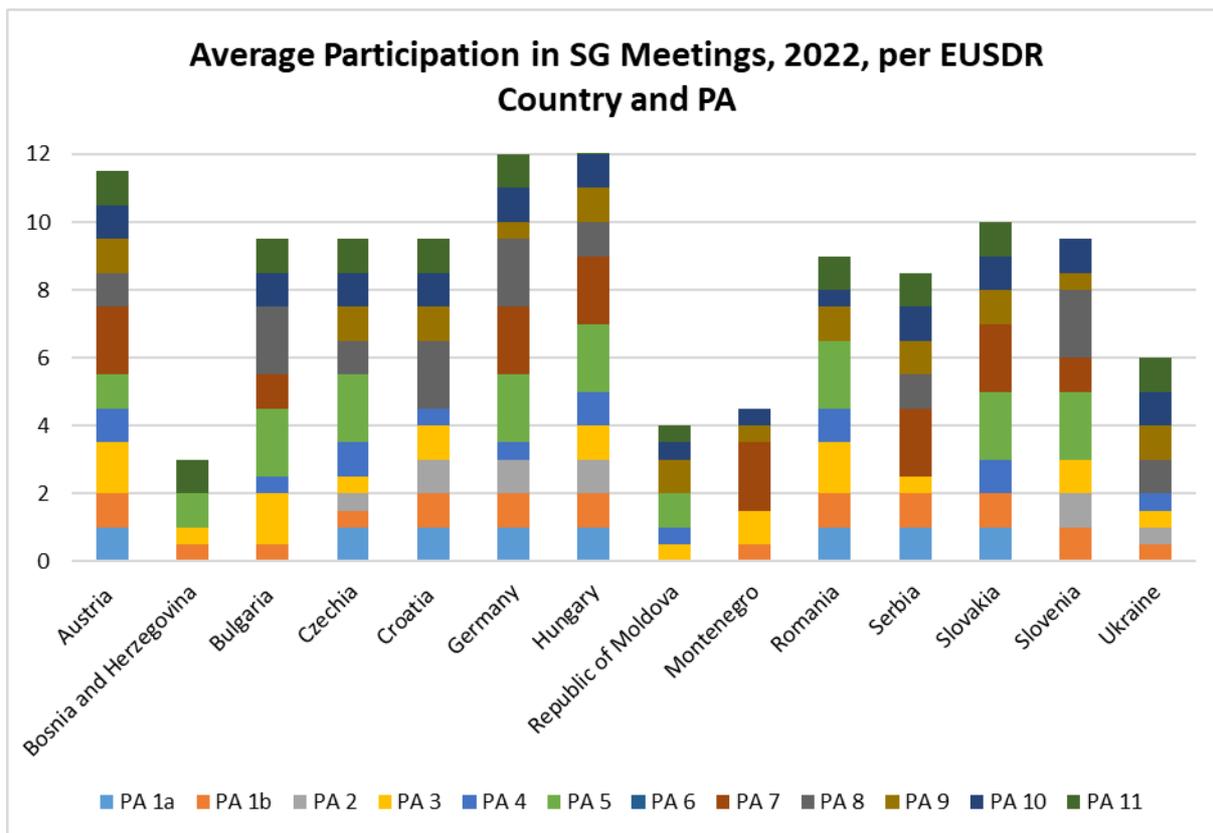


Figure 30: Average Participation (= Number of participations divided by the number of SG meetings in 2022), per EUSDR Country and PA (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

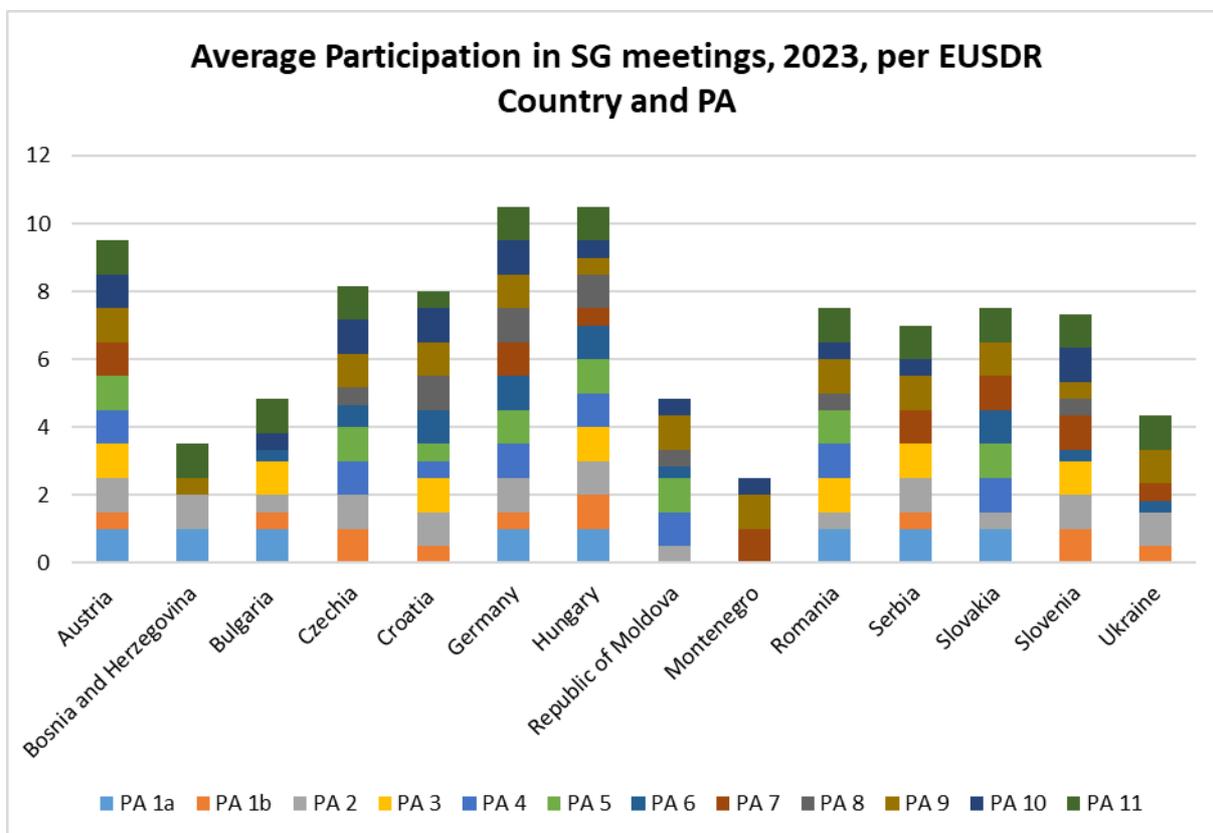


Figure 31: Average Participation (= Number of participations divided by the number of SG meetings in 2023), per EUSDR Country and PA (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

Figure 32 shows the long-term development of participation in SG meetings since 2015 per PA. There are clear differences between the PAs in terms of participation in SG meetings. For example, PA 11 achieved a consistently high participation of over 70% throughout the entire observation period. PA 9 shows a continuous increase in SG member participation in the last six years – while in 2017 approximately 50% of EUSDR states participated in SG meetings, by 2023 this figure has increased to over 80%. In other PAs, there is a clear need to increase the active participation of SG members<sup>351</sup>. For example, in PA 2 in 2022, in PA 1b and in PA 6 in 2023, a 50% participation of SG members could not be achieved. The participation rate of SG members in PA 8 is consistently low, remaining below 50% throughout the entire observation period and reaching a minimum of only around 21% in 2021.

The coordination of nomination and appointment of SG members by the EUSDR member states lies within the responsibilities of the NCs (see EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper<sup>352</sup>, p. 4). The interplay with the EC and its support is also defined in the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, p. 9. Based on the data provided by the PACs, the overall country-wise active participation in SG meetings continues to be regarded as not overall satisfactory and varies thematic-wise and geographically. This highlights the need for intensifying the efforts to further increase active participation in SG meetings so that the SGs can fulfil their responsibilities as defined in the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper and hence guarantee the overall implementation of the EUSDR.

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<sup>351</sup> Having noted the active participation figures in the tables, these indicators/figures however do not address the quality of work or outcomes in the PAs. Additionally, PACs have developed several good practice approaches (see pages 87-88).

<sup>352</sup> EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, 2023. [Online](#).

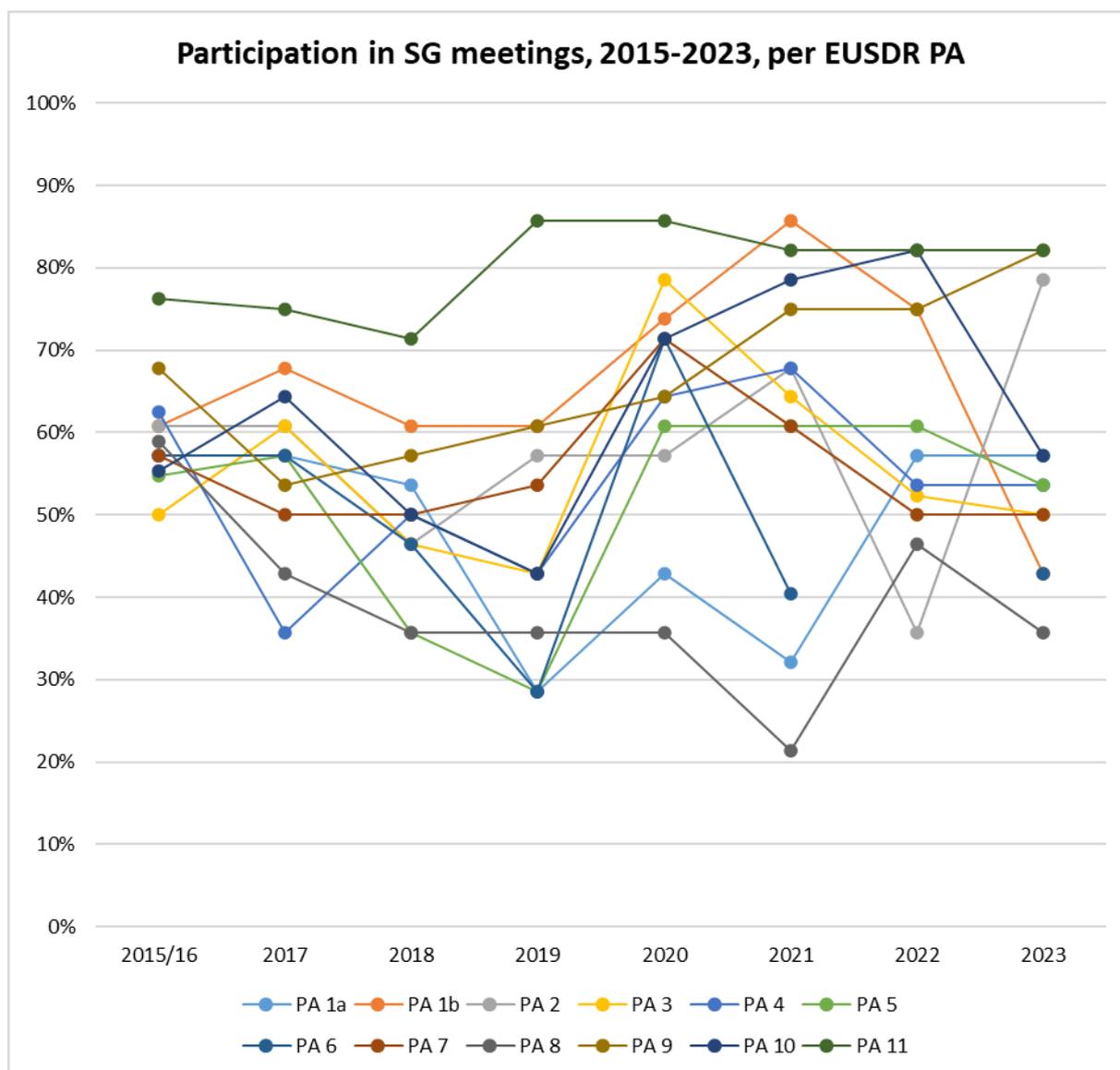


Figure 32: Participation in SG meetings, 2015-2023, per EUSDR PA (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

To support, concentrate and streamline the work of the Steering Groups, **Working Groups/Task Forces/Advisory Bodies** (see Table 7) have been established in several EUSDR PAs, namely:

Table 7: Working Groups/Task Forces in 2022 and 2023

PA	Working Groups/Task Forces/Advisory Bodies
<b>PA 1a</b>	PA 1a has established one Working Group for each Action: Action 1: Contribute to improve waterway and port infrastructure & management Action 2: Foster business development Action 3: Facilitate fleet modernisation Action 4: Support the further roll-out and enhancement of River Information Services Action 5: Contribute to the enhanced quality of education and jobs Action 6: Contribute to the simplification, harmonisation and digitalisation of administrative processes  Joint EUSDR PA 1a & PA 11 Working Group on Administrative Processes
<b>PA 1b</b>	n/a
<b>PA 2</b>	n/a
<b>PA 3</b>	n/a
<b>PA 4</b>	PA 4 regularly cooperates with the relevant ICPDR expert groups and reports on achievements

<b>PA 5</b>	Disaster Management Working Group (DMWG)
<b>PA 6</b>	DSTF (Danube Sturgeon Task Force) DIAS (Danube Region Invasive Alien Species Network) Danubeparks SONDAR (Soil Strategy Network in the Danube Region) DLTF (Danube Landscape Task Force) Masterplan Bavarian Danube
<b>PA 7</b>	WG Danube Funding Coordination Network WG European Research Area WG RIS3 and cooperation with JRC (Joint Research Center) WG Higher Education and Mobilities
<b>PA 8</b>	WG Innovation and Technology Transfer WG Digital Danube WG Artificial Intelligence WG Clusters and Regional Development WG Circular and Bioeconomy WG Female Entrepreneurship
<b>PA 9</b>	Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence
<b>PA 10</b>	Danube Local Actors Platform Task Force on Cross-border Healthcare
<b>PA 11</b>	Joint EUSDR PA 1a & PA 11 Working Group on Administrative Processes

A key function of the SG members is to regularly **update** the PAs on developments in their thematic fields. As Figure 33 illustrates, this was mainly done through oral reporting in SG meetings, but also through updates per email and written (annual) reports.

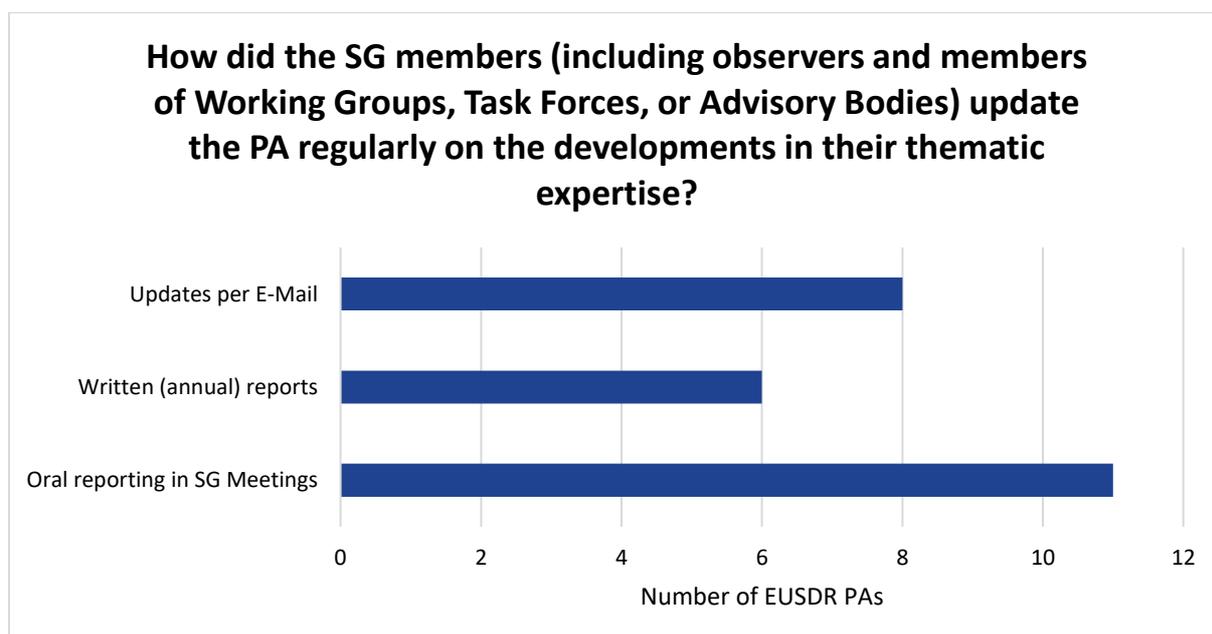


Figure 33: Regular updates by SG Members on developments in their thematic expertise (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

To keep the EUSDR member states up to date on developments and activities within the EUSDR PAs, the results of the SG meetings are transmitted to relevant stakeholders on **national levels**. As Figure 34 illustrates, this happens primarily through a regular exchange between the PACs and the NCs apart from the SG meetings. In several cases, the minutes are also submitted to the NCs directly after the SG meetings. SG members also distribute information from SG meetings in the networks of their line ministries, often in addition to a regular exchange with the corresponding line ministries. SG members also actively promote the impact of the Strategy on their respective national levels. In three PAs, the SG members are also in regular exchange with the respective NCs, in two PAs information is sent to

the line ministries after each SG meeting. In one PA, NCs are part of the SG members and are invited to attend the meetings.

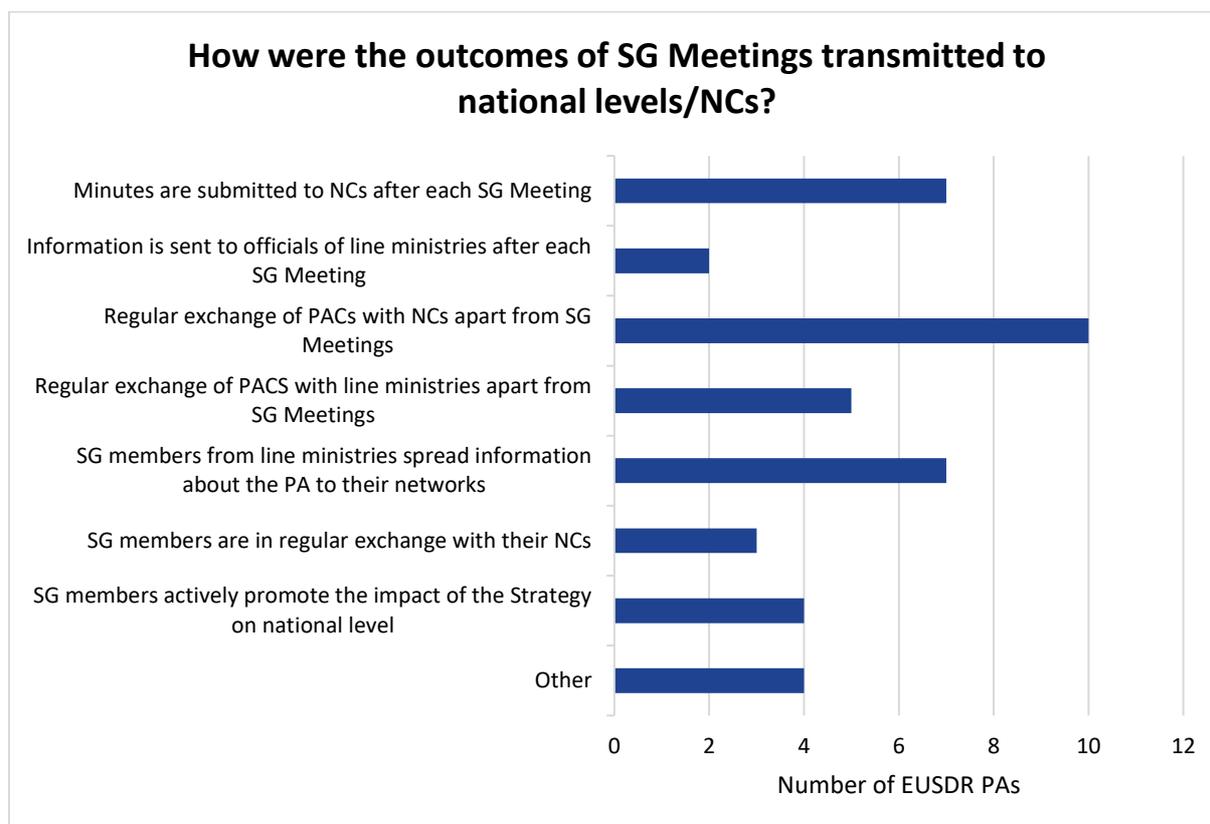


Figure 34: Transmission of SG meeting outcomes to national levels/NCs (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

The EUSDR PACs provided the following good practice examples resulting from the cooperation and teamwork with their SGs:

In **PA 1a**, pre-meeting communication with SG members effectively increased participation and involvement. These informal discussions helped identify pressing issues, which is a crucial ongoing task due to personnel changes.

In **PA 1b**, SG members significantly contributed to aligning the new Western Balkans-Eastern Mediterranean European Transport Corridor<sup>353</sup> with several branches towards the Adriatic coast. They were also instrumental in updating the extensive list of projects.

In **PA 2**, SG members actively participated in organising expert workshops, helping to find speakers and disseminate information. They were particularly involved in events in their countries, such as SI, HR, and BA. The SI SG member played a key role in organising the hydrogen panel at the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum<sup>354</sup>. Thematic online roundtables have also been successful, with engaged SG members contributing to lively discussions.

Through a joint activity and agreement with the SG Members, the Danube Strategy Flagships of **PA 3**<sup>355</sup> were identified and promoted in all events.

<sup>353</sup> Western Balkans – Eastern Mediterranean Corridor. [Online](#).

<sup>354</sup> Hydrogen workshop organised by PA 2 at the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>355</sup> Danube Strategy Flagships of PA 3. [Online](#).

In **PA 4**, the SK and HU PAC Teams have maintained strong cooperation, facilitating joint activities through regular trilateral meetings with stakeholders from ICPDR and ISRBC that are also part of the SG. This collaboration has resulted in eight Letters of Recommendation (LoRs)<sup>356</sup> to support the implementation of the revised EUSDR Action Plan objectives and valuable SG member feedback on PA-specific brochures.

Cooperation within **PA 5** was primarily achieved through SG meetings. New SG members were introduced to the work of PA 5 during these meetings, and updates on thematic expertise were generally communicated via email.

In **PA 6**, a survey was conducted to align the work of the SG more closely with the interests and current needs of the SG members. Based on the responses, PA 6 will propose providing greater support to the line ministries from the countries in the implementation of policy frameworks.

AT SG members assist **PA 7** in launching and managing the Multilateral Danube Call<sup>357</sup>, with the cooperation of funding agencies of the participating countries.

In **PA 8**, larger, more engaging events with opportunities to present projects at SG meetings have been successful. Side meetings organised by Working Group Coordinators have also attracted increased participation.

In **PA 9**, there is an institutionalised exchange on current developments in education and labour market, including good practice examples to address current challenges.

In **PA 10**, the SG network serves as an incubator for innovative ideas, bringing together representatives from EUSDR member states, international institutions and other relevant stakeholders. The Task Force for Cross-border Emergency Healthcare<sup>358</sup>, a prime example of this collaboration, coordinates initiatives, enhances knowledge sharing, and supports existing and new projects within the Danube Region.

**PA 11** collaborated effectively with Czech colleagues on a police-led project<sup>359</sup>, resulting in a project video<sup>360</sup> and strong support for the Danube Strategy Flagships. PA 11 expanded its involvement in annual DARIF (Danube River Law Enforcement Forum)<sup>361</sup> operations, conducting a comprehensive survey to gather feedback from law enforcement officers across the Danube Region. The survey results<sup>362</sup> provided valuable insights into border control challenges and opportunities. To further enhance border control practices, HU colleagues developed a survey to assess the effectiveness of current measures and FRONTEX's role. The findings from this survey will inform future strategies and policies.

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<sup>356</sup> PA 4 Letters of Recommendation (LoRs). [Online](#).

<sup>357</sup> Multilateral Danube Call. [Online](#).

<sup>358</sup> Cross-border Emergency Healthcare Danube Region. [Online](#).

<sup>359</sup> Collaboration for Dismantling Drugs Distribution and Illicit Laboratories (CO3DIL). [Online](#).

<sup>360</sup> CO3DIL Project Video. [Online](#).

<sup>361</sup> DARIF – Setting up the Structure of a Danube River Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>362</sup> Law Enforcement Officials' Opinion on the Security Situation and Cooperation on the Danube – Based on the "DARIF 2022" International Questionnaire Survey, 2023. [Online](#).

## 4.4. Cooperation with EUSDR core and other stakeholders

Cooperation of PAs with EUSDR core stakeholders (EC, NCs, other PAs, SGs, DSP, DYC, DRP, other MRS) as well as with other stakeholders (academia, civil society, administrative institutions, national associations, business sector, supranational institutions) is an integral element in the implementation of the EUSDR. The following chapter highlights the PA's cooperation with EUSDR core stakeholders as well as with other stakeholders.

### **Cooperation with EUSDR core stakeholder**

#### **European Commission: DG REGIO**

The PACs emphasise a strong and positive relationship between EUSDR PAs and EC/DG REGIO<sup>363</sup>. DG REGIO representatives are actively involved in SG meetings and provide regular updates on EU initiatives and offer support to PA activities.

There is a high level of communication and cooperation between the two stakeholder groups. This is facilitated by regular meetings, email exchanges, and participation in joint events. EC/DG REGIO has been a key partner in providing information, guidance, and support to the PAs.

#### **European Commission: line DGs other than DG REGIO**

EC/DG MOVE (Mobility and Transport)<sup>364</sup> plays a significant role in facilitating and chairing the negotiation process for the meetings of Ministers of Transport in the Danube Region. Since 2014, these meetings have been issuing bi-annual conclusions on fairway rehabilitation and maintenance. Cooperation between the EUSDR and EC/DG MARE (Maritime Affairs and Fisheries)<sup>365</sup> is focused on the "EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters"<sup>366</sup>, which aligns with Horizon Europe's goals to protect and restore the health of our ocean and waters through research and innovation, citizen engagement and blue investments<sup>367</sup>. The EUSDR and EC/DG ENV (Environment)<sup>368</sup> are cooperating to implement regional initiatives aligned with the European Green Deal<sup>369</sup>. These initiatives focus on safeguarding biodiversity, reducing pollution, and restoring ecosystems in the Danube Region<sup>370</sup>. EC/DG ECHO (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations)<sup>371</sup> and EC/DG HOME (Migration and Home Affairs)<sup>372</sup> participated in a policy level panel discussion focused on the development of a macro-regional framework to improve disaster preparedness and response, organised by EUSDR PA 5. Additionally, cooperation between EUSDR PA 11 and DG HOME was initiated in the field of home affairs and security. EC/ DG RTD (Research and Innovation)<sup>373</sup> provided information for funding opportunities to EUSDR PA 7. EC/DG EMPL (Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion)<sup>374</sup> and EC/DG EAC (Education, Youth, Sport and Culture)<sup>375</sup> showed efficient cooperation with EUSDR PA

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<sup>363</sup> DG REGIO. [Online](#).

<sup>364</sup> DG MOVE. [Online](#).

<sup>365</sup> DG MARE. [Online](#).

<sup>366</sup> EU Mission: Restore our Ocean and Waters. [Online](#).

<sup>367</sup> EUSDR Embedding Week 2023, Presentation by Andreea Strachinescu, Head of Unit European Commission DG MARE; Mission ocean and waters. [Online](#).

<sup>368</sup> DG ENV. [Online](#).

<sup>369</sup> The European Green Deal. [Online](#).

<sup>370</sup> A Greener Danube Region. About the ongoing embedding process, Presentation by Andrea Bianchini, European Commission, DG ENV, Unit E1, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>371</sup> DG ECHO. [Online](#).

<sup>372</sup> DG HOME. [Online](#).

<sup>373</sup> DG RTD. [Online](#).

<sup>374</sup> DG EMPL. [Online](#).

<sup>375</sup> DG EAC. [Online](#).

9 and participated in several PA 9 meetings. Contacts were established between EC/DG AGRI (Agriculture and Rural Development)<sup>376</sup> and EUSDR PA 10 in the framework of the SMART ERA project<sup>377</sup> preparation.

PACs have expressed the desire for increased support of and collaboration with EC line DGs, particularly in areas such as environmental protection measures or research and innovation. While progress has been made with most line DGs in the reporting period, there is still room for improvement in terms of regular engagement and participation in PA activities.

### **EUSDR National Coordinators (NCs)**

Most PAs emphasise a strong and positive relationship between the EUSDR PACs and NCs. NCs play a crucial role in facilitating communication, coordination, and collaboration among stakeholders at the national level. NCs are actively involved in SG meetings and provide support, information, and guidance to PA activities. There is a high level of cooperation and regular exchange between PACs and NCs through formal meetings and regular communication.

While some PAs have highlighted the need for more consistent engagement from some NCs, in general the PAs are satisfied with the cooperation and collaboration between PAs and NCs. For example, EUSDR PA 2 highlights the active collaboration with the HU NC on a daily, operational level, and the regular contact with the CZ NC. PA 4 emphasises that there has been continuous support by HU NC and SK NC. Additionally, the RS NC helped PA 4 to establish contacts for a workshop on drinking water quality<sup>378</sup>, held in November 2023. Within the framework of EUSDR PA 5, regular meetings are held with the HU NC. EUSDR PA 7 highlights the excellent cooperation with the SK NC and the RS NC as well as the EUSDR PCIES in the reporting period. Within EUSDR PA 9, an efficient cooperation has been established with several NCs through regular contact via email and through meetings, for example with AT NCs. EUSDR PA 11 has established working relations with the BG NC and BY NCs.

### **Other EUSDR Priority Areas (PAs)**

Cooperation with other PAs is generally regarded as positive. There are regular exchanges of information and collaboration on activities between PAs, facilitated through joint meetings, email communication, and participation in each other's events. The DSP is actively engaged in facilitating joint meetings and identifying links for potential cross-PA cooperation efforts. Cooperation often centres on specific topics where areas of expertise overlap, such as climate change, environmental risks, and biodiversity. Some PAs also work together on initiatives related to specific EUSDR member states.

Examples of successful collaboration include PA 1a and PA 11 streamlining border control processes<sup>379</sup>, and PA 4, PA 5, and PA 6 jointly organising a conference on Nature-Based Solutions<sup>380</sup>. While there are instances of limited engagement from some PAs, the overall picture is one of active collaboration and knowledge exchange. Table 8 provides an overview of cross-PA cooperation.

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<sup>376</sup> DG AGRI. [Online](#).

<sup>377</sup> SMART ERA. [Online](#).

<sup>378</sup> Securing Drinking Water Supply – workshop. [Online](#).

<sup>379</sup> PA 1a & PA 11 Working Group on Administrative Processes. [Online](#).

<sup>380</sup> Nature-based solutions for flood risk reduction. [Online](#).

Table 8: Cooperation among PAs (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

	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												
PA 8												
PA 9												
PA 10												
PA 11												

### Overall cooperation with Steering Groups (SGs)

The reporting reveals a range of cooperation levels between PAs and SGs, from “excellent” to needing improvement. Challenges include limited SG member engagement, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, and varying levels of thematic expertise among members.

Recommendations to strengthen cooperation include providing clearer orientation for SG members and offering more engaging activities to increase participation. For example, one EUSDR PAC reported: “After COVID-19, it proved harder to mobilise SG members to have them participate actively in SG meetings. Since personnel changes in the ministries are ongoing phenomena, keeping contact to SG members is a time-consuming but crucial activity of the PACs”.

### Steering Groups (SGs) of other Priority Areas (PAs)

While the frequency and depth of interactions vary, several PAs have reported regular participation in each other’s SG meetings and collaborative efforts on specific topics. PA 1a engaged regularly in PA 11 SG meetings. PA 4 regularly participates in PA 5 and PA 7 SG meetings, while PA 5 attends SG meetings of PA 4 and PA 6. PA 6 joins SG meetings of PA 4 and PA 5. PA 8 was regularly invited to PA 7 SG meetings. PA 10 SG meetings are open to collaboration with other PAs when fields of expertise and interests overlap. PA 11 held a joint session during its SG meeting with members of PA 10.

### **Danube Strategy Point (DSP)**

The cooperation between PACs and the DSP is perceived as very positive. DSP is actively involved in meetings, events, and information exchanges, providing crucial support in logistics, technical platforms, and communication. DSP regularly attends SG meetings and workshops, promotes PAC activities on social media, and provides technical support for online and hybrid meetings. DSP also assists in identifying and promoting Danube Strategy Flagships, such as through short promotional videos. In addition to logistical support, DSP contributes to capacity-building efforts, organising training sessions, including seminars for newcomers, and adapting their support based on PACs' needs, such as enhancing relations with the DYC. A few suggestions have been made in the reporting to streamline communication and reduce procedural complexity. DSP's role in governance, capacity building, and stakeholder activities is well-regarded, supporting a productive and effective partnership.

### **Danube Youth Council (DYC)**

Cooperation with the DYC is steadily improving. Several PAs have integrated DYC members into their activities, with some PAs seeing regular participation in meetings, workshops, and events. Notable contributions include active involvement in organising events and moderating discussions. Communication has been frequent, and cooperation is described as excellent in many cases. Moving forward, there are plans to deepen this collaboration, with a focus on increasing youth involvement and incorporating their perspectives in key discussions and initiatives. More information on the PA's cooperation with the DYC can be found in chapter 2.7.

### **Interreg Danube Region Programme including MA, JS and NCPs**

Cooperation with the DRP and its Joint Secretariat (JS) is regarded as consistently smooth and effective. There is regular contact regarding administrative, contractual, and project implementation matters, with the DRP providing crucial support, especially in financing and technical aspects. Communication with the JS is ongoing, particularly during reporting periods, and the collaboration is described as excellent, with prompt assistance in project-related challenges. Several EUSDR NCs are members of the DRP Monitoring Committee. In some cases, interaction with the Managing Authority (MA) and National Contact Points (NCPs) is less frequent but remains effective when needed. Overall, the cooperation is stable, with no significant obstacles reported. A few suggestions have been made in the reporting to streamline communication and reduce procedural complexity.

### **Managing Bodies of other European Funding Programmes (e.g., ESF+, CEF, etc.)**

Cooperation with Managing Bodies of other European Funding Programmes varies. Some PAs report no contact or cooperation. The EUSDR ESF MA network<sup>381</sup>, led by PA 9 and PA 10, facilitates regular exchanges, joint planning, and best practice sharing, particularly supporting the embedding of EUSDR activities for 2021-2027.

### **Other EU Macro-regional Strategies (MRS) representatives**

The cooperation between members of the PAs and representatives of other EU MRS is characterised by increasing collaboration and knowledge sharing. Engagement has been notable in areas such as energy security, disaster management, and sustainable development, with stakeholders participating in workshops, panels, and meetings across multiple macro-regions.

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<sup>381</sup> ESF Managing Authorities Network in the Danube Region. [Online](#).

Joint initiatives have focused on critical themes like supporting educational infrastructure, transitioning to clean energy, and promoting circular economies. Regular exchanges and events have facilitated the sharing of best practices and experiences. Table 9 provides an overview of PA’s cooperation with other MRS representatives.

Table 9: Cooperation of PAs with representatives of other MRS (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

	PA 1a	PA 1b	PA 2	PA 3	PA 4	PA 5	PA 6	PA 7	PA 8	PA 9	PA 10	PA 11
EUSBSR												
EUSAIR												
EUSALP												

The DSP supported cooperation among EUSDR core stakeholders and with other stakeholders by, for example, facilitating joint meetings or informing PACs about opportunities for cooperation with various thematically relevant stakeholders.

### Involvement of and cooperation with other stakeholders

In addition to the EUSDR core stakeholders, cooperation with other stakeholders is also important to capture different perspectives and generate new ideas. Figure 35 provides an overview on the stakeholders being involved in the PA's activities and how this cooperation was approached.

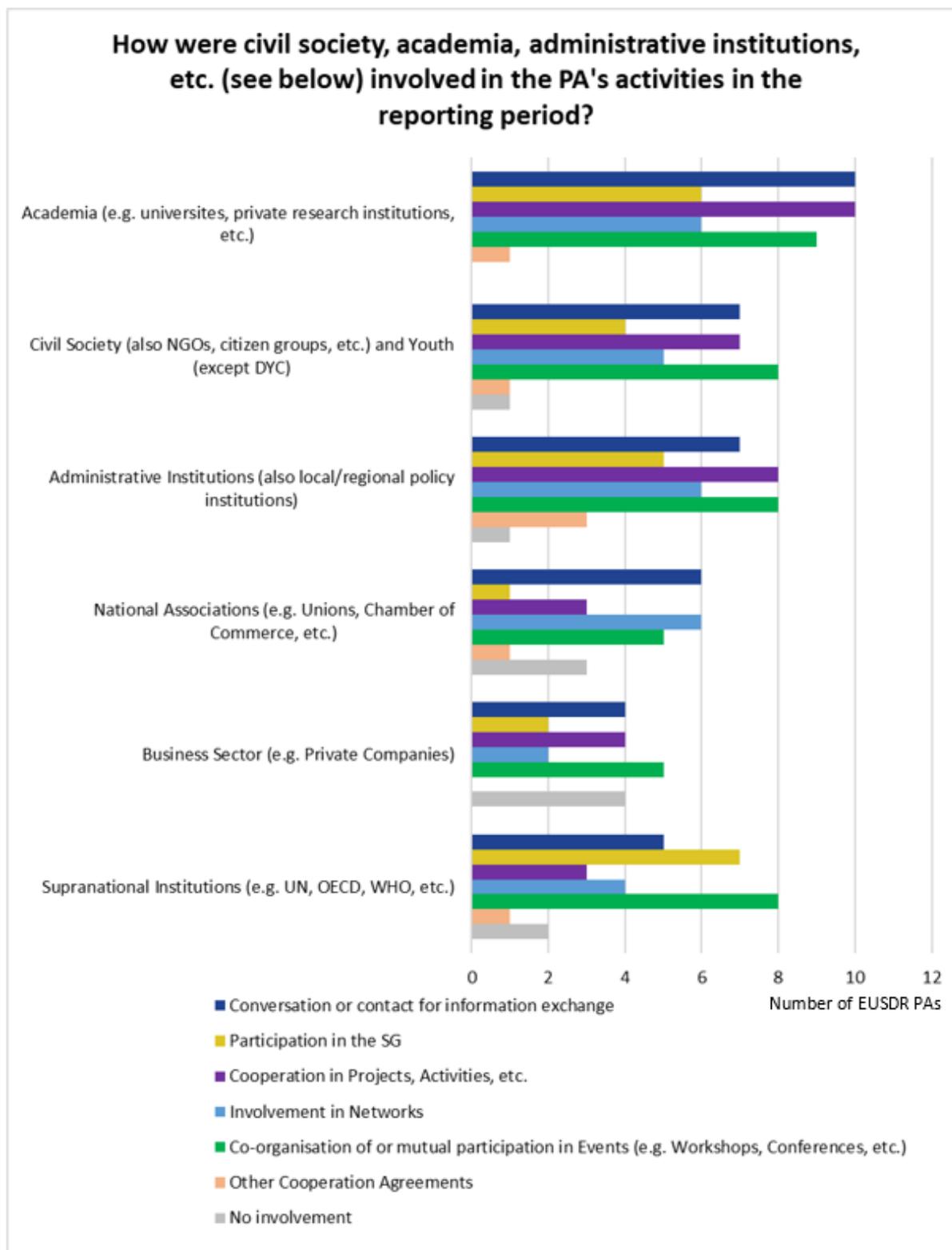


Figure 35: Cooperation with other stakeholders (based on PAC Reporting 2024)

### **Academia (e.g., universities, private research institutions, etc.)**

Cooperation with academia is characterised by ongoing collaboration through joint meetings, project partnerships, and active involvement in TFs. Universities and research institutions frequently contribute to the generation of projects, participate in SG meetings, and provide expertise in specific initiatives. Academia plays a crucial role in preparing statements, reports, and new projects, with academics often invited to present their work, especially on emerging topics. Although cooperation has decreased in some areas, significant efforts continue to engage academics through strategic forums, events, and joint projects.

In PA 6, universities participate in specific TFs<sup>382</sup> such as the Danube Landscape Task Force, Danube Region Invasive Alien Species Network, and Danube Sturgeon Task Force. The chair of the Danube Region Invasive Alien Species Network, who comes from academia, also participates in the SG. PA 7 has particularly strong links with academia, including a WG focused on higher education mobilities<sup>383</sup> led by a professor. Collaboration with the Danube Rectors Conference<sup>384</sup> is valuable for preparing statements, reports, surveys, and new projects. Several PAs invite academic representatives to their events, providing opportunities for researchers to present their work, especially on new and unexplored topics. PA 9 has developed the Danube Region Monitor<sup>385</sup> in collaboration with the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw)<sup>386</sup>, providing statistical analysis and showcasing trends in the areas of education and labour market in the Danube Region. PA 10 actively engages with academia, recognising the importance of including academic stakeholders in discussions, events, and networks. Academic representatives are invited to participate in various activities, including the Danube Participation Day<sup>387</sup> and Young Bled Strategic Forum<sup>388</sup>, as speakers, moderators, and presenters.

### **Civil Society (also NGOs, citizen groups, etc.) and Youth (except DYC)**

Collaboration is achieved through the implementation of projects and initiatives that involve civil society. NGOs are actively engaged in WGs/TFs, often leading initiatives or contributing as key partners. Civil society, including youth organisations, is also deeply involved in preparing and implementing events, contributing to discussions and activities. There is a strong emphasis on fostering collaboration with NGOs, civil society organisations, and young leaders, ensuring their voices are heard and their expertise utilised in the broader EUSDR context.

Civil society is actively involved in the EUSDR through initiatives like the collaboration with NGOs in disaster management within the framework of PA 5, where organisations like the Budapest Firefighter Association<sup>389</sup> lead Working Groups, and various civil organisations from the Danube Region contribute to disaster response and preparedness efforts. The Danube Participation Days<sup>390</sup>, organised by PA 10 in cooperation with the Danube Civil Society Forum<sup>391</sup>, their Danube Local Actors Platform (D-LAP) and further civil society organisations from the Danube Region, explicitly address the role of civil society and local actors in achieving strategic goals of the EUSDR. The National Participation Days also facilitate a better involvement of the civil society into the implementation of the EUSDR. The „First Macro-

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<sup>382</sup> PA 6 Task Forces – Stakeholder involvement, multi-level governance, joint implementation. [Online](#).

<sup>383</sup> WG 1: Higher education and mobility (WG HEM). [Online](#).

<sup>384</sup> Danube Rectors' Conference. [Online](#).

<sup>385</sup> Danube Region Monitor. [Online](#).

<sup>386</sup> WIIW. [Online](#).

<sup>387</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>388</sup> Young Bled Strategic Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>389</sup> Budapest Firefighter Association. [Online](#).

<sup>390</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>391</sup> Danube Civil Society Forum. [Online](#).

Regional Citizen Agora” was organised by the European House in Budapest (December 2023)<sup>392</sup> where a proposal for a macro-regional civil strategy was adopted. The celebration of the ICPDR Danube Day national events (e.g., in Hungary) on 29 June<sup>393</sup> provides a great possibility to raise public awareness on the Danube Region.

More information on youth involvement can also be found in chapter 2.7.

### **Administrative Institutions (also local/regional policy institutions)**

Cooperation with administrative institutions is achieved through joint projects and participation in SG meetings. For instance, national public authorities, represented in SGs, play a crucial role in disseminating EUSDR-related information within their networks. Representatives from local and regional authorities, including ministries, are actively involved in thematic workshops and panels, such as those on district heating decarbonisation in HR and BA<sup>394</sup> within the framework of PA 2.

Representatives of administrative institutions are fully integrated into various PAs, not only as SG members but also as observers and TF leaders, reflecting their vital role in shaping and implementing EUSDR activities. Local, regional, and national policy institution representatives are key participants in thematic events and projects, such as the Danube Participation Day<sup>395</sup> and the SMART ERA Project<sup>396</sup> (both PA 10), where their structural support is essential for success.

### **National Associations (e.g., unions, chambers of commerce, etc.)**

Cooperation with national associations in the EUSDR is robust, involving collaboration on joint projects and participation in thematic events. For instance, within the framework of PA 2, the STREEM project with the Hungarian National Association of Local Authorities and similar associations from other countries, focusing on energy communities, was implemented. Representatives of national associations also regularly participate at the annual Stakeholder Conferences organised by PA 9.

Chambers of Commerce and business support organisations are also key partners in some PAs, particularly through information exchange and participation in thematic events.

### **Business Sector (e.g., private companies)**

Cooperation with the business sector is diverse and varies across different PAs. Engagement typically occurs through collaborative projects, SG meetings, and participation in events such as conferences and workshops. For example, PA 2 organised workshops in 2023 to showcase Hungarian geothermal energy practices, attracting local district heating companies for discussions and business-to-business (B2B) meetings.

The private sector’s involvement extends to environmental initiatives, such as the WePass2<sup>397</sup> project of PA 4 aimed at facilitating migratory fish passages. A strong emphasis is put on increasing the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in thematic events, recognising their crucial role in addressing challenges and opportunities, especially within PA 8. Private sector organisations are seen as essential partners for knowledge and financial support, bridging connections between decision-makers, civil society, and youth.

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<sup>392</sup> First Macro-Regional Citizen Agora. [Online](#).

<sup>393</sup> Danube Day. [Online](#).

<sup>394</sup> District heating system decarbonisation workshop, Zagreb. [Online](#). & District heating system decarbonisation workshop, Tuzla. [Online](#).

<sup>395</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>396</sup> SMART ERA. [Online](#).

<sup>397</sup> WePass2. [Online](#).

PA 10 highlights the importance of partnerships with private enterprises to enhance stakeholder cooperation and foster capacity building. PA 11 collaborates with the business sector through joint initiatives with PA 1a, focusing on reducing administrative barriers in inland navigation<sup>398</sup>.

### **Supranational Institutions (e.g., UN, OECD, WHO, etc.)**

Cooperation has been particularly successful with the Danube Commission (DC)<sup>399</sup>, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR)<sup>400</sup>, the International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC)<sup>401</sup>, and other organisations focused on water management and environmental protection. These collaborations have been maintained through mutual exchange and regular participation in meetings, joint events, and trilateral discussions, ensuring continuous engagement and progress on shared objectives. Additionally, there has been excellent cooperation with the Transport Community Permanent Secretariat (UNECE ITC)<sup>402</sup> and various universities and energy associations. These partnerships have facilitated active engagement on topics relevant to transportation, energy, and academic research.

PA 2 has established strong relationships with energy-focused organisations like the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA)<sup>403</sup> and the Energy Community<sup>404</sup>, exemplified by the participation of Energy Community representatives in hydrogen panels at the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum<sup>405</sup>. In PA 4, representatives from the ICPDR<sup>406</sup>, the ISRBC<sup>407</sup>, the Carpathian Convention<sup>408</sup>, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)<sup>409</sup>, and the Global Water Partnership (GWP)<sup>410</sup> regularly participate in SG meetings. Additionally, PA 4 established the cooperation with the International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area (IAWD)<sup>411</sup> in 2023. PA 6 benefits from the involvement of the ICPDR, the Carpathian Convention, and DANUBEPARKS<sup>412</sup> as observers in its SG, facilitating ongoing dialogue and collaboration. Additionally, PA 9 continues its active cooperation with the Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE)<sup>413</sup>, ensuring that educational reform efforts are aligned with EUSDR objectives. PA 11 has developed strong ties with law enforcement organisations such as the South Eastern Law Enforcement Cooperation Center (SELEC)<sup>414</sup>, Europol<sup>415</sup>, and Interpol<sup>416</sup>. This collaboration includes participation in conferences and expert events, as well as joint planning of thematic activities.

### **Future involvement of stakeholders**

For PA 1b, there is a particular focus on increasing participation from the business sector, including airports, air carriers, railway and motorway companies, as well as port authorities. PA 4 puts an emphasis on engaging the younger generation and plans to develop platforms to facilitate their

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<sup>398</sup> PA 1a & PA 11 Working Group on Administrative Processes. [Online](#).

<sup>399</sup> Danube Commission. [Online](#).

<sup>400</sup> International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). [Online](#).

<sup>401</sup> International Sava River Basin Commission. [Online](#).

<sup>402</sup> Transport Community Permanent Secretariat. [Online](#).

<sup>403</sup> International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). [Online](#).

<sup>404</sup> Energy Community. [Online](#).

<sup>405</sup> Hydrogen workshop organised by PA 2 at the 12<sup>th</sup> EUSDR Annual Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>406</sup> International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). [Online](#).

<sup>407</sup> International Sava River Basin Commission. [Online](#).

<sup>408</sup> Carpathian Convention. [Online](#).

<sup>409</sup> World Wildlife Fund (WWF). [Online](#).

<sup>410</sup> Global Water Partnership (GWP). [Online](#).

<sup>411</sup> International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area. [Online](#).

<sup>412</sup> DANUBEPARKS. [Online](#).

<sup>413</sup> Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE). [Online](#).

<sup>414</sup> Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC). [Online](#).

<sup>415</sup> Europol. [Online](#).

<sup>416</sup> Interpol. [Online](#).

involvement in the upcoming financing period. For PA 8, there is a concerted effort to engage more small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by making events and discussions more relevant to their interests, such as focusing on financing issues. Financial institutions like the World Bank<sup>417</sup> and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)<sup>418</sup> are also recognised as important partners.

### Support for stakeholder involvement

First and foremost, stronger political support is perceived as essential to enhance the visibility and impact of PA activities. Increased backing from political leaders can help prioritise EUSDR initiatives and foster a more collaborative environment.

Additionally, PAs need assistance in identifying and establishing connections with relevant stakeholders, particularly in the business sector and civil society. This support would facilitate more effective collaboration and engagement. Organising matchmaking activities at larger events would also be beneficial, as these networking sessions can help PAs connect with potential partners and stakeholders, thereby promoting project development and knowledge exchange.

The provision of resources and training on effective stakeholder engagement was perceived as crucial for improving PAs' ability to manage diverse stakeholder groups. Furthermore, facilitating cross-sector collaboration, especially related to green transition and energy issues, would enhance the overall effectiveness of the Strategy.

Effective communication support is also necessary to help PAs convey their activities and achievements to a wider audience, which can attract more stakeholder interest and involvement. Capacity Building, as facilitated by the DSP during the reporting period through tailored workshops, can further enhance PAs' capabilities in engaging stakeholders effectively.

## 4.5.Strategic Policy Development

The activities of the EUSDR can have multiple effects and impacts in the respective EUSDR member states. To ensure the long-term success and effectiveness of the Strategy, political support and participation at different administrative levels (i.e., EU, transnational, national, regional and local level) is essential. An important element is the **recognition and inclusion of strategic activities and objectives of the EUSDR in specific policies**, for instance on EU and/or national level.

**EUSDR Pillar 1 (Connecting the Region)** has impacted policy development, particularly in the fields of transport and energy. PA 1a has contributed to the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T)<sup>419</sup> by implementing the Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan<sup>420</sup> through bi-annual ministerial meetings and coordinating transnational projects like FAIRway Danube<sup>421</sup>. PA 1b contributed to green corridors and supports transport corridors for refugees affected by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. PA 2 focused on decarbonising heating systems, phasing out Russian gas, and exploring hydrogen's potential in the energy transition. PA 2 also supported project proposals aligned with these priorities,

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<sup>417</sup> World Bank. [Online](#).

<sup>418</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). [Online](#).

<sup>419</sup> Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). [Online](#).

<sup>420</sup> Fairway Rehabilitation and Maintenance Master Plan – Danube and its navigable tributaries, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>421</sup> FAIRway Danube. [Online](#).

particularly those related to renewable energy, hydrogen, and geothermal heating, helping the Danube Region meet national targets in line with EU policies such as the Paris Agreement<sup>422</sup> and REPowerEU<sup>423</sup>.

**EUSDR Pillar 2 (Environmental Protection)** focuses on environmental policy development, particularly in water management, agriculture, disaster management, and biodiversity. In 2022-2023, PA 4 produced studies and communication materials<sup>424</sup>, such as a brochure on minimising water pollution in the field of agriculture, highlighting good practices like organic farming and digital agriculture. Additional materials covered topics like migratory fish, drinking water quality, and urban water retention measures. A short film was also created to showcase the achievements of PA 4 over the past decade. This approach also helped to raise awareness of these essential issues among political decision-makers. PA 5 focused on disaster management aligned with the European Green Deal<sup>425</sup> and discussed collaboration opportunities to address the consequences of the war against Ukraine in the field of environmental risks. PA 6 supports key frameworks like the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030<sup>426</sup> and Natura 2000<sup>427</sup>. Its efforts contribute to the green transition and react to changing policy frameworks, aiming to influence future EU policies in this field.

**EUSDR Pillar 3 (Building Prosperity)** focuses on promoting green, digital, and social transitions, particularly in areas such as project development, business competitiveness, and skills development. PA 7 supports projects related to these transitions, while also collaborating with PA 4 on water protection activities. PA 8 contributes by fostering initiatives like the BrAIIn project<sup>428</sup>, which focuses on using AI in manufacturing, agrifood, and health, including its role in supporting elderly people. PA 8 also organised events like the “expert forum on the Green Deal as finance and business opportunity”<sup>429</sup> and supported projects like DECIDE<sup>430</sup> and WE.Circular<sup>431</sup>, both of which emphasise digital services and sustainable circular transitions, particularly for women entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, PA 9 focuses on education and skills, including digital and green skills and jobs. Events such as the International Stakeholder Conference<sup>432</sup>, evolving labour market demands as well as training and educational challenges of the green and digital transitions. The Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence<sup>433</sup> further supports Vocational Education and Training (VET) related to green skills and social inclusion. PA 8 and PA 9 have contributed to the European Week of Regions and Cities<sup>434</sup>, addressing challenges in the Danube Region such as lack of labour force and skilled workers, but also discussing possible approaches to jointly develop solutions.

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<sup>422</sup> The Paris Agreement. [Online](#).

<sup>423</sup> REPowerEU. [Online](#).

<sup>424</sup> PA 4 Brochures & Leaflets. [Online](#).

<sup>425</sup> The European Green Deal. [Online](#).

<sup>426</sup> EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030. [Online](#).

<sup>427</sup> Natura 2000. [Online](#).

<sup>428</sup> BrAIIn – BRinging Artificial INtelligence towards SMEs (BrAIIn). [Online](#).

<sup>429</sup> PA 8 Expert Forum on the Green Deal as finance and business opportunity. [Online](#).

<sup>430</sup> DECIDE: Danube Region Programme Digital Services for Circular Economy – a Toolbox for Regional Developers and SME. [Online](#).

<sup>431</sup> WE.Circular: Boosting digital and industrial capacity for sustainable circular transition of women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region. [Online](#).

<sup>432</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> International Stakeholder Conference of EUSDR PA 9. [Online](#).

<sup>433</sup> Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence. [Online](#).

<sup>434</sup> European Week of Regions and Cities. [Online](#).

**EUSDR Pillar 4 (Strengthening the Region)** focuses on promoting social, green, and digital transitions, especially in the context of social policy. The EUSDR ESF MA Network<sup>435</sup> focused on advancing social policy in the Danube Region, aligning with the EU goals for a just transition<sup>436</sup>. The Smart Communities network<sup>437</sup> supports the digital transition in rural areas, addressing green and social aspects through innovative approaches. In 2023, the Danube Participation Day<sup>438</sup> focused on UA's and the MD's EU accession, showcasing how macro-regional cooperation and civil society can support green and social transitions in those countries. While PA 11 is not directly involved in green, digital, or social policies, it acknowledges their significance and communicates these themes during meetings with stakeholders.

Furthermore, EUSDR PAs are actively **bridging local and regional actions with European political priorities** through various initiatives, including stakeholder engagement, participatory processes, capacity building, and knowledge sharing. They are also bringing in local and community-based stakeholders through workshops, consultations, and other events.

**PA 1a** is working to address challenges related to inland waterway transport, such as infrastructure, business development, fleet modernisation, digitalisation, personnel shortages, and administrative burden. They are linking these regional challenges with European policy priorities and objectives, as well as European funding opportunities. PA 1a is also feeding the policy-making process on infrastructure development and discussing with EUSDR member states on how to achieve the goal of zero emission of the transport system by 2050.

**PA 2** is supporting and participating in various projects that aim to establish energy communities in the Danube Region to fulfil the EU climate targets<sup>439</sup>. They are concerned with various technical and socioeconomic aspects of creating appropriate conditions for renewable energy communities and highlighting how to raise awareness on the benefits of such initiatives.

**PA 4** is informing relevant stakeholders about current changes and challenges in related topics through thematic workshops, promotional leaflets and materials. They are also inviting local stakeholders to share their experience with experts about new legislative measures, best practice examples and to seek effective and optimal solutions.

**PA 5** is aligning its activities with the objectives and initiatives outlined in relevant European policies. They are actively engaging local and community-based stakeholders in their activities to ensure that policies and initiatives are grounded in local realities and effectively address the needs and concerns of communities.

**PA 6** is involving a number of stakeholders from science, civil society and authorities in its activities through Task Forces. The SG is seen as an important interface between

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<sup>435</sup> EUSDR ESF Network. [Online](#).

<sup>436</sup> The Just Transition Mechanism: making sure no one is left behind. [Online](#).

<sup>437</sup> Smart Communities Network. [Online](#).

<sup>438</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>439</sup> Climate strategies & targets. [Online](#).

implementation and policy level, and SG members are being motivated to disseminate the activities in their context.

**PA 7** is committed to helping bridge the gaps in research and innovation performance between EUSDR members states. They provide stakeholders with information on funding opportunities and regularly launch the Multilateral Danube Call<sup>440</sup>.

**PA 8** is bringing in stakeholders from the field of economy to exchange information and develop new common solutions and answers to tackle challenges.

**PA 9** is bringing together stakeholders on all levels and raising awareness about actions and solutions implemented in the field of labour market and education through the organisation of thematic workshops, conferences and other events.

**PA 10** is focused on bridging the gap between European policies and local realities mainly through the Danube Participation Day<sup>441</sup> which aims to showcase local initiatives, share insights from EUSDR governance, discuss needs and opportunities and provide trainings. The SMART ERA project<sup>442</sup> specifically focuses on involving local authorities from rural areas in macro-regional cooperation.

**PA 11** is interlinking its activities with other regional conferences and events, such as the Police Cooperation Convention<sup>443</sup> and the Salzburg Forum<sup>444</sup>. They are also using the SG meetings as a platform where a given EUSDR state that holds the Presidency of the Council of the EU is given the opportunity to present its priorities to the Danube member states.

In some PAs, the strategic objectives and activities have also been incorporated into **international/multilateral agreements/commitments**. The EUSDR serves as driving force for such agreements/commitments.

In **PA 1a**, the Danube ministerial conclusions<sup>445</sup> were drawn during a ministerial meeting in June 2022, affirming the political dedication to effectively restoring and maintaining the Danube waterway.

In **PA 5**, the Disaster Management Working Group<sup>446</sup> signed a Letter of Intent with the CTIF<sup>447</sup> (International Association of Fire & Rescue Services) Danube Group in 2022, expressing joint interest in sharing information, knowledge and support in extending the network in the field of fire and rescue in the Danube Region.

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<sup>440</sup> Multilateral Danube Call. [Online](#).

<sup>441</sup> Danube Participation Day. [Online](#).

<sup>442</sup> SMART ERA. [Online](#).

<sup>443</sup> Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe. [Online](#).

<sup>444</sup> Salzburg Forum. [Online](#).

<sup>445</sup> Danube Ministerial meeting conclusions on effective waterway infrastructure rehabilitation and maintenance on the Danube and its navigable tributaries. [Online](#).

<sup>446</sup> Disaster Management Working Group. [Online](#).

<sup>447</sup> CTIF. [Online](#).

Additionally, institutional cooperation was established that initiated or contributed to **policy changes**.

**PA 4** initiated new institutional cooperation with the International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area (IAWD)<sup>448</sup> in 2023.

Several PAs were also considered in **policy documents**, such as reports or declarations.

**PA 1a** was mentioned in the Danube Ministerial conclusions of June 2022<sup>449</sup>.

**PA 4**, **PA 5**, and **PA 6** were mentioned in a joint declaration on “Achieving functional biodiversity in the Danube-Carpathian Region by mainstreaming ecological connectivity”<sup>450</sup>, developed and endorsed by the Carpathian Convention, the ICPDR and EUSDR PA 4, PA 5, and PA 6.

**PA 9** was mentioned in the ERI SEE (Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe) work programme<sup>451</sup>, bilateral declarations/memoranda of understanding, and reports of the Austrian Erasmus+ National Agency and the European Training Foundation (ETF).

**PA 11** was mentioned in the Conclusions of the Ministerial Meeting held on 23 and 24 March 2023 in Brussels, BE, by the Ministers of Interior<sup>452</sup>. Additionally, the Danube Ministerial conclusions of June 2022 on transport infrastructure<sup>453</sup> mentioned the cooperation between PA 1a and PA 11.

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<sup>448</sup> International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area (IAWD). [Online](#).

<sup>449</sup> Danube Ministerial meeting conclusions on effective waterway infrastructure rehabilitation and maintenance on the Danube and its navigable tributaries. [Online](#).

<sup>450</sup> Achieving functional biodiversity in the Danube-Carpathian Region by mainstreaming ecological connectivity, 2022. [Online](#).

<sup>451</sup> Education Reform Initiative of South Eastern Europe (ERI SEE) Work Programme 2022-2023. [Online](#).

<sup>452</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Danube Security Conference, 2023. [Online](#).

<sup>453</sup> Danube Ministerial meeting conclusions on effective waterway infrastructure rehabilitation and maintenance on the Danube and its navigable tributaries. [Online](#).

## 5. Conclusions and Outlook

The reporting period 2022-2023 was heavily impacted by the **unprovoked, unjustified and full-fledged war of aggression against Ukraine since 24 February 2022 by the Russian Federation**. Since the beginning of the invasion, the EUSDR and its core stakeholders have provided crucial support to Ukraine. Key efforts include restoring contacts with Ukrainian stakeholders and collaborating on humanitarian and logistical support, such as establishing refugee corridors and reopening freight routes. The Solidarity Lanes initiative<sup>454</sup> was supported, along with efforts to extend the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T)<sup>455</sup> and contribute to projects focused on rebuilding Ukrainian infrastructure. The EUSDR PAs also played a role in decarbonising Ukraine's heating sector through various projects, thereby improving the country's energy autonomy and resilience, and helped address environmental issues, such as plastic pollution, in collaboration with Ukrainian experts. Efforts were also made in the field of educational support, rebuilding schools, and providing refugee aid, while initiatives also focused on innovation, the labour market, and technology transfer projects with Ukrainian partners. The EUSDR also facilitated political and diplomatic support for Ukraine, with Ukrainian representatives attending security conferences and continuing their active role in EUSDR core governance meetings, despite the ongoing military invasion.

In June 2022, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova officially received the status of EU accession candidates<sup>456</sup>. Bosnia and Herzegovina also received this status in December 2022<sup>457</sup>, meaning that all EUSDR member states are now either EU members or EU accession candidates. EUSDR PAs have increased their focus on **EU enlargement** by actively engaging the EU accession countries Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine in transnational initiatives, processes, networks and projects. Efforts have included knowledge sharing, particularly in areas such as transport legislation, decarbonisation, and energy transition, helping candidate countries align with EU standards and reduce dependencies on external influences. Workshops and conferences have facilitated the exchange of best practices and expertise to help non-EU countries meet EU requirements and foster economic development. 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. PAs have supported civil society engagement, innovation, and capacity building, helping non-EU states meet the criteria for EU accession. The focus on EU enlargement has been emphasised in key meetings and will continue to be a priority.

Chapter 3 highlights significant developments and achievements across EUSDR PAs aimed at enhancing connectivity, environmental protection, prosperity, governance, and security in the Danube Region. Each PA reported progress on activities under the revised EUSDR Action Plan and expressed confidence that most targets and objectives will be successfully met. Beyond these PA-specific accomplishments, the EUSDR's broader contributions to policy objectives are also noteworthy. Through macro-regional cooperation, the EUSDR plays a critical role in advancing key EU policy priorities, including the objectives of EU Cohesion Policy, the European Green Deal, and the digital transition.

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<sup>454</sup> EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes. [Online](#).

<sup>455</sup> Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). [Online](#).

<sup>456</sup> Statement by President von der Leyen on opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, via video message. [Online](#).

<sup>457</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina EU membership application. [Online](#).

The activities of the Strategy and its PAs had an **impact on policies at various levels** – EU, transnational, national, regional, and local. For instance, the EUSDR has influenced certain transnational and multilateral agreements and commitments, and some PAs and/or their activities have been incorporated into policy documents.

The PAs have highlighted several challenges that they have been confronted with in 2022 and 2023. One major issue continues to be the **limited engagement of SG members**, often due to resource constraints, frequent personnel changes, and inadequate communication between NCs and SG members. This has hindered the effective dissemination of information and collaboration on project development. This is a challenge that was already identified in the Implementation Report 2020-2021<sup>458</sup>. Therefore, the active role of NCs together with PACs in the activation of SG members in the respective EUSDR member states, with the support of the EC, must be emphasised. Additional efforts to address these challenges include maintaining close contact with SG members and emphasising their role as multipliers in their respective countries. In some cases, policy discussions have lacked continuity due to fluctuating membership and insufficient handover processes between outgoing and incoming SG members. To improve this, onboarding modules and individual training sessions have been introduced. Enhanced networking at the national level and a stronger focus on identifying Danube Strategy Flagships and engaging SG members more actively are also proposed to increase effectiveness.

Another key challenge is **maintaining an active and robust portfolio of activities within the PAs**, essential for advancing key objectives. External factors such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the consequences of climate change and rising energy costs have complicated the PA's work, requiring flexibility in adapting priorities. Administrative burdens, despite some improvements, continue to divert time from actual implementation, and in some cases limited funding options further impede the development of transnational initiatives, processes, networks and projects.

The lessons learned by the PAs highlight the importance of maintaining a stable and knowledgeable PAC team which is essential for maintaining **institutional memory** and achieving the targets of the PAs. Although there have been personnel changes over the years, overall stability has been retained, which has been key to the Strategy's ongoing success. Furthermore, focusing on thematic areas with realistic and achievable targets has proven more effective than aiming for overly ambitious objectives that are beyond the PA's control. Regular communication with SG members also emerged as an important approach to retain engagement and participation.

Involving new stakeholders, such as young individuals through the **DYC**, contributed to an increased focus on political commitment and national-level support. DYC members proposed concrete actions and projects and suggested topics, brought ideas to the attention of decision-makers from EUSDR member states, contributed to the EUSDR PAs, raised attention for the special features of their countries and regions at the transnational level and participated in EUSDR events as well as international and EU related youth events.

The hybrid format for events, combining **online and in-person participation**, increased participation and allowed for broader involvement in events. However, it also created new challenges, as some participants opted for online attendance for convenience, reducing the chances for meaningful personal contact. Direct, personal contact with SG members helped activate and engage them, while online thematic SG discussions proved useful for discussing specific topics. Although organising online

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<sup>458</sup> EUSDR Implementation Report 2020-2021. [Online](#).





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