



PROCESS/IMPLEMENTATION EVALUATION

FINAL REPORT

April 2025

Process/Implementation Evaluation assessing the strategic dimension, governance and technical implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), Final Report

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Executive summary

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) was endorsed by the European Council in 2011, involving 14 EU and non-EU countries, with the aim of addressing common challenges in the Danube Region. The Strategy is structured around four Pillars, implemented through 12 Priority Areas (PAs), each managed by Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) from different Danube Region states.

Aim and scope of the evaluation

The EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation assessed the Strategy's implementation from 2020-2024 aiming to identify implementation challenges and best practices, and recommendations for improvement. Utilising an impact model to analyse the causal steps toward achieving EUSDR objectives, the evaluation focused on six aspects: the political commitment to the EUSDR, governance, technical implementation and cooperation among core stakeholders, funding, policy impact, and external factors influencing its implementation.

The evaluation, conducted from March 2024 to March 2025, employed a mixed-methods approach, including desk research, interviews, surveys targeting the EUSDR core stakeholders and Managing Authorities and Joint Secretariats of EU funding programmes, a focus group and participation in the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum in Vienna in June 2024. Data was collected from diverse stakeholders to ensure comprehensive representation across PAs and participating states. The final report has been also consulted with the EUSDR core stakeholders to ensure its relevance and effectiveness.

The evaluation report presents key findings, conclusions and recommendations structured around the six evaluation aspects mentioned above.

Main findings and conclusions

Political commitment: Political commitment to the EUSDR has generally improved or remained stable since 2020, particularly in EU candidate countries viewing the EUSDR as a pathway to their EU accession. However, some stakeholders perceive a decline due to the Strategy's comparatively long existence, inconsistent engagement from key decision-makers on national level, and a prioritisation of other EU and national priorities over the EUSDR's priorities. A more proactive role from the European Commission, particularly line DGs, is needed.

Best practices for enhancing EU and national political commitment include EUSDR Presidencies focused on long-term objectives, engaging EUSDR Annual Forums, regular ministerial meetings and national coordination platforms. The EUSDR Action Plan remains relevant but needs flexibility to respond to current and future developments and challenges like the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and future EU priorities. The cross-MRS cooperation has also not been fully utilised to enhance the MRS visibility and political commitment.

Governance: EUSDR core stakeholders face challenges in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities due to limited time, staff, financial resources and staff fluctuations. The Danube Strategic Point (DSP) plays a crucial support role, but further improvements are needed in enhancing the visibility and communication, especially to national politicians and streamlined information sharing.

Some main positive governance aspects include the development of the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper as a key tool for understanding roles and responsibilities among key stakeholders, long-term focus of EUSDR Presidencies (PCIES), the Danube Strategic Point (DSP)' support, written procedures as well as capacity building for newcomers.

However, improvements are needed such as: making the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper less complex and better illustrate the linkages between stakeholders, streamlining communication and information sharing among core stakeholders, increase engagement from higher-level EC officials as well as better involving the Danube Youth Council (DYC) members across the PAs and systematically tracking their contribution. The Danube Youth Organisation Network (DYON) is expected to enhance youth participation but requires clear role definition and funding.

While PAC reporting has improved since 2020, challenges remain due to limited resources, data gaps and difficulties in engaging SGs. Higher focus of (PAC and NC) reporting on the actual implementation and impact of macro-regional cooperation is important, particularly in the context of post-2027 funding discussions. A potential performance-based approach in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will require EUSDR to showcase tangible results to secure financial support from various EU instruments.

Technical implementation and policy coordination: Stakeholder engagement within the EUSDR has improved since 2020, but national-level coordination and information sharing between the NCs, PACs, and SGs members require further enhancement. National inter-institutional coordination platforms for the EUSDR (and other macro-regional strategies) are seen as a good approach to enhance coordination at the national level and align national priorities with EUSDR objectives. Similarly, cooperation with external stakeholders, including EU institutions and civil society, has progressed, but needs further strengthening, particularly with line DGs and regional/local actors.

Technical implementation of the EUSDR faces challenges such as low SG involvement, staff turnover, financial constraints, PACs focusing on project implementation over coordination due to the financing structures and its requirements, and difficulty in translating the EUSDR Action Plan into concrete actions. Communication of the EUSDR has improved in recent years, but reaching the political level remains a challenge, necessitating active involvement from core stakeholders, especially NCs, and leveraging national coordination platforms for wider information dissemination.

Funding: The EUSDR's initiatives are primarily funded through the Interreg DRP, alongside other EU programmes. While Interreg DRP is generally accessible, administrative burdens persist. A clearer articulation of benefits and specific demands/projects to these funding programmes is needed to enhance support for EUSDR initiatives. Despite the availability of various EUSDR embedding tools, awareness and utilisation among programmes remain low. EUSDR Managing Authority (MA) networks facilitate cooperation and information exchange. However, while some EUSDR MA networks, such as the ESF MA network, function effectively, programme participation in others remains inconsistent.

Future collaboration with the programmes is crucial, particularly in developing their post-2027 programme strategies, joint calls and result capitalisation. The EUSDR Action Plan and actions align with EU Cohesion Policy but must in the future adapt to post-2027 frameworks. Horizontal collaboration across PAs requires improvement. Enhanced information flow on strategic projects and processes across all PAs is essential for effective implementation and increased synergies.

Policy impact: The EUSDR has contributed to various strategic outcomes such as enhanced networking and knowledge exchange, increased political attention to key topics and support for EU enlargement. Tangible achievements include unified border procedures, infrastructure projects, cross-border healthcare services, among others. Main governance changes during 2020-2024 supporting the generation of these outcomes include the establishment of the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, the DSP's support, streamlined procedures, embedding processes, and strengthened EUSDR Presidencies.

However, concerns persist regarding the EUSDR's potential shift towards a project-oriented focus or the perception of a few PACs as being excluded from funding discussion on national, regional and EU levels. Moreover, soft outcomes (e.g., platforms for cooperation between EU and EU candidate countries on equal footing, networking, improved information exchange, exchanges on policy developments) are also vulnerable to staff changes and inconsistent interaction between EUSDR core stakeholders.

External factors: The EUSDR's implementation has been influenced by various external factors, primarily the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which highlighted the need for strategic flexibility. The pandemic disrupted in-person meetings but also accelerated the use of written procedures and online participation. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, while devastating, underscored the importance of macro-regional cooperation among EUSDR stakeholders.

Main recommendations

The recommendations in this evaluation are structured as a **roadmap**, aligned with the six key evaluation aspects/questions. Each recommendation clearly defines **what** should be done, **why** it is necessary, **who** is responsible, **where** (level of application), and **when** it should be implemented. To ensure effective implementation, recommendations are **prioritised** as **high, medium, or low** based on expert assessments of the most pressing needs and their potential impact on the Strategy.

Key recommendations include:

Political commitment:

- Increase EU political engagement by involving additional stakeholders (e.g., DG ENEST, line DGs, European Parliament and others) and securing greater commitment on EU and national levels.
- Promote the benefits of macro-regional cooperation through national coordination platforms, an EUSDR impact model and clear, targeted messaging for policymakers.
- Ensure flexibility in the EUSDR Action Plan to remain adaptable to evolving challenges and opportunities, particularly in the post-2027 EU Cohesion Policy framework.

Governance:

- Simplify the EUSDR Governance Architecture to enhance stakeholder understanding and better illustrate the linkages between stakeholders.
- Enhance SGs engagement through better information sharing, coordination via national coordination and PA platforms and capacity-building. Recognize SG contributions through success stories and event presentations to foster a sense of value and encouraging continued involvement.
- Strengthen youth involvement by clarifying the Danube Youth Council (DYC) role, tracking its contributions, operationalising the Danube Youth Organisation Network (DYON) with a clear operational plan, and facilitating collaboration between the DYC and the DYON.
- Improve monitoring and reporting by aligning with the EUSDR impact model, focusing on both soft and tangible results, streamlining data collection and preparing for potential performance-based reporting in the post-2027 programming period.

Technical implementation and policy coordination:

- Maintain a strategic focus beyond project implementation by developing an EUSDR impact model, adopting mission-oriented approaches that connect individual projects to larger EUSDR's objectives, and building capacity to translate the EUSDR Action Plan into concrete actions and projects.
- Expand stakeholder engagement on EU and national levels, strengthening communication between line DGs and EUSDR core stakeholders (especially PACs), encouraging participation in EC events, and regularly involving regional/local actors in EUSDR activities.
- Strengthening information sharing and collaboration across macro-regional strategies (MRS).
- Increase the visibility and communication of EUSDR by sharing success stories in EU/national events, targeted communication events (e.g., sector or stakeholder-specific events), engaging in EU enlargement initiatives, and collaborating with civil society and academia.

Funding:

- Enhance funding access and capacity-building of the EUSDR core stakeholders by providing targeted support.
- Embed EUSDR into the post-2027 EU Cohesion Policy, positioning it as a key capitalisation tool that scales national project results and translate EU policies into impactful regional actions.
- Align the EUSDR embedding tools and activities with the post-2027 Cohesion Policy framework, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, and future EU enlargement scenarios.
- Address misalignment between EUSDR core stakeholders and various EU-funded programmes by promoting EUSDR as a platform for capitalising on programme results, supporting territorial cohesion, and fostering dialogue between Interreg and mainstream programmes. Clear objectives and project proposals should be formulated to align with funding programmes.
- Enhance coordination and synergy across MRS to maximize impact and avoid duplication.

Policy Impact:

- Increase EUSDR awareness through briefings for policymakers and alignment with relevant EU programmes.
- Better demonstrate the EUSDR's impact by using an impact model to assess EUSDR's contributions, focusing on key transnational issues, and ensuring alignment with EU priorities.
- Support strategic EU priorities by developing concrete proposals such as for EUSDR's role in Ukraine's recovery and EU enlargement.
- Enhance collaboration with DG REGIO, DG ENEST, line DGs, and other key stakeholders to strengthen EUSDR's impact.

External factors:

- Use the PCY agenda as a "reality check" tool to regularly review and adapt the EUSDR Action Plan to emerging needs, challenges and opportunities.
- Establish ad-hoc (crisis-response) working groups across PAs to develop plans/ protocols for quickly responding to external events (e.g., post-2027 Cohesion Policy changes, Ukraine's recovery).

Most recommendations are prioritised as medium or medium-to-high. Actions are expected from stakeholders on various levels (EU, EUSDR, and national) starting from 2025 onwards, with some longer-term initiatives extending beyond 2027.

Abbreviations

CEF	Connecting Europe Facility
CF	Cohesion Fund
COSME	Competitiveness of Enterprises and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
DG ENEST	Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (former DG NEAR-Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations)
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
DSP	Danube Strategy Point
DYC	Danube Youth Council
DYON	Danube Youth Organisations Network
EaSI	EU Funding Programme for Employment and Social Innovation
EC	European Commission
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF+	European Social Fund Plus
EUSAIR	The EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region
EUSBSR	The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	The EU Strategy for the Danube Region
HLG	High-Level Group
INTRANET	EUSDR Internal Information Exchange System
IPA	The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
KEQ	Key Evaluation Question
LIFE	EU Funding Instrument for Environment and Climate Action/L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement
MRS	Macro-regional strategies
MS	EU Member States
NC	National Coordinator
NDICI	Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument
ÖROK	Österreichische Raumordnungskonferenz (Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning) Organisation established by the Austrian federal government, states and municipalities to coordinate spatial development on national level
PAC	Priority Area Coordinator
PCY, PCIES	EUSDR Presidency, Presidencies
SG DANUVAL	EUSDR Steering Group for Evaluation
SG	Steering Group
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
ToR	Terms of References
WG	Working Group

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) was endorsed by the European Council in 2011 as the second of four EU macro-regional strategies (MRS). The European Commission (EC) prepared the EUSDR in cooperation with 14 EU and EU candidate countries¹ and stakeholders to address common challenges in the Danube Region.

Figure 1: Danube Region



Source: Danube Strategy Point

The **EUSDR** provides an integrated policy framework for strengthening cooperation between states and regions. It consists of four Pillars, which are implemented through **12 Priority Areas (hereafter PAs)**. These Pillars cover a wide range of political priorities within the Danube Region.

The PAs represent the most important and vital components of the Strategy. Each PA is managed by two or more **Priority Area Coordinators (PACs)** coming from different Danube Region states. PACs (together with the Steering Groups' members) represent the expertise in the respective sector and drive forward the overall process, identifying key sectors for action and adopting the most suitable goals to implement actions².

The **National Coordinators (NCs)** are a focal point on the national level. They are the core strategic decision-makers within the governance structure of the EUSDR and have a strategic coordination function of the Strategy within their state. They are appointed, and recalled, in written form by their government/respective institution (e.g. line ministry)³.

¹ In 2011, these states were (potential) candidate states of the European Neighbourhood.

² EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper (2020, updated 2023)

³ EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper (2020, updated 2023)

Objective of the EUSDR

The EUSDR provides an essential framework that strengthens cooperation and supports existing institutions in the participating states for the effective implementation of EU policy frameworks and legislation.

Recognising the significance of the Danube River and its basin, the EUSDR fosters collaboration among the states within the Region to:

- address common challenges and
- achieve shared objectives

By promoting integrated approaches, the EUSDR aims to enhance economic, social, and environmental development while preserving the unique natural and cultural heritage of the Danube Region. The EUSDR contributes to EU objectives, reinforcing major EU policy initiatives.

Through the EUSDR, the participating states can exchange best practices, coordinate policies, and pool resources to tackle common challenges and opportunities related to infrastructure development, environmental protection, social cohesion, economic prosperity, institutional capacity and security. By harnessing the collective strength of the participating states, the EUSDR facilitates better coordination for a harmonised and effective implementation of EU policy frameworks and legislation (or alignment with the EU Acquis in the case of EU candidate countries), fostering a prosperous and resilient Danube Region for the benefit of its people and the environment.

The revised EUSDR Action Plan⁴, published in 2020, is the integrated response to this common set of challenges and opportunities and helps unlock the full potential of the Danube Region.

In total, the 12 PAs have defined 85 Actions. For each **PA** the following elements are described in the EUSDR Action Plan:

- **strategic frame:** The EUSDR Action Plan defines the mission and objectives of each PA, as well as Provisions related to the EU Cohesion Policy, Enlargement Policy and EU Neighbourhood Policy, and sector-relevant strategic frameworks.
- **actions and targets:** The EUSDR Action Plan lists a number of actions and respective targets. These targets are designed to measure progress towards achieving the objectives of the PA.
- **examples of projects/activities** (past, present and future).

In 2023, the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) published the EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028. It addresses the evaluation framework and the planned evaluations for this timeframe.

Based on the EUSDR Evaluation Plan (EP), a public procurement for the EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation was launched, and the company M&E Factory GmbH⁵ was assigned to conduct this evaluation.

⁴ <https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/EUSDR-ACTION-PLAN-SWD202059-final-1.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.me-factory.eu/references/>

1.2 Aim and scope of the evaluation

The EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation has been conducted in the period March 2024–March 2025.

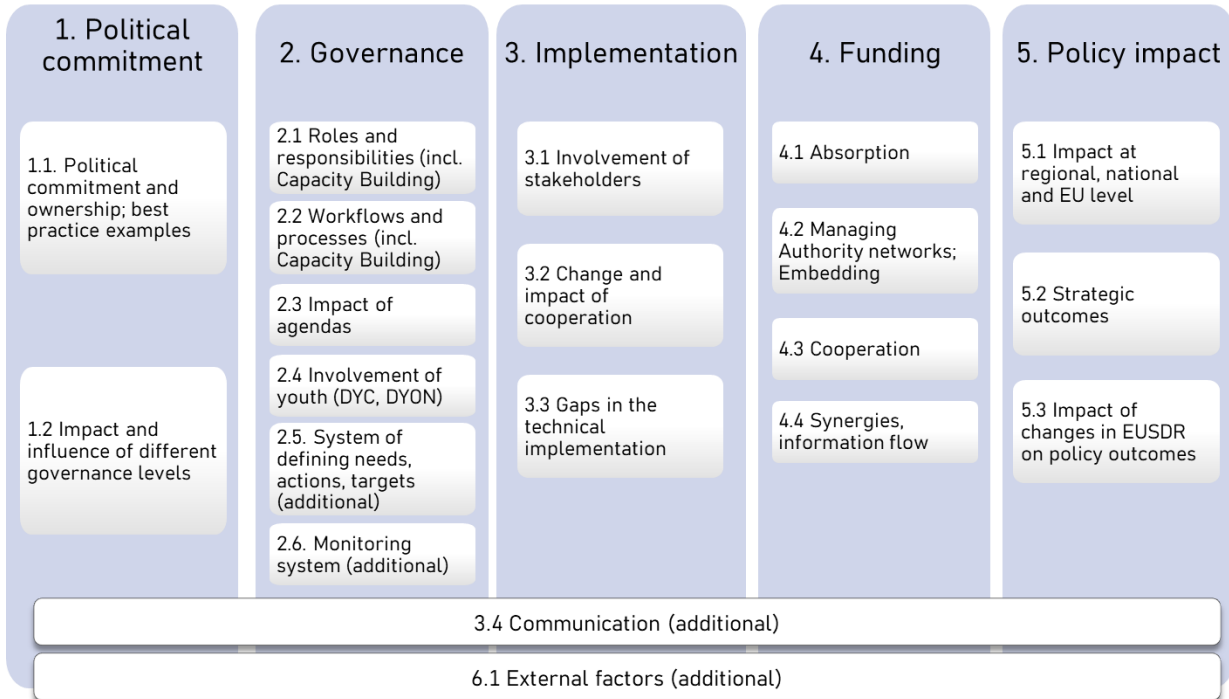
As specified in the ToR, the EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation aims to:

- assess the responsibilities, capacities and cooperation intensity of/among EUSDR core stakeholders
- identify well-functioning processes and workflows providing concrete learning and implementation examples
- identify challenges in the implementation of the Strategy and develop recommendations on how to overcome them
- develop appropriate conclusions and recommendations for future revisions of the EUSDR Action Plan

The evaluation should provide an understanding of the Strategy's implementation and identifies areas for improvement. The evaluation results should inform future policy evaluations and guide the EUSDR's ongoing implementation with the aim of improving internal processes and thus achieve its objectives. The EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation should also provide input for the Policy Evaluation which will be carried out in 2027/2028 according to the EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023–2028.

The figure below outlines the **five topics and subtopics** outlined in the EUSDR EP 2023–2028 and ToR for the respective evaluation. Additional aspects added by the evaluation team are: external factors, system of defining needs, actions, targets, monitoring system, communication, and capacity building⁶.

Figure 2: Overview of the evaluation topics



Source: M&E Factory based on the EUSDR Evaluation Plan and the ToR, 2024

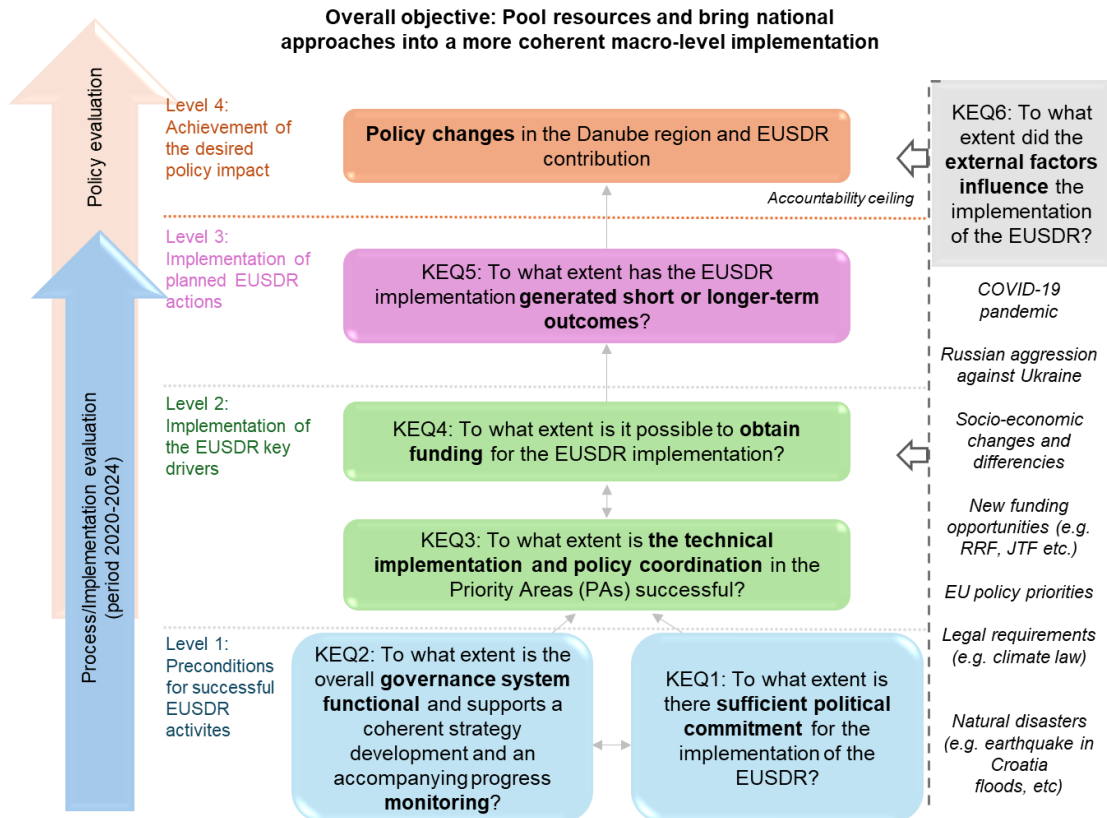
⁶ Communication and capacity building are not the subject of this evaluation. Thus, they will be addressed to some extent in relation to the activities and tools used within the Strategy.

1.3 Methodology

The EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation covers the **period 2020-2024**, following the Operational Evaluation 2019. The backbone of the evaluation is the **impact model**, which outlines the causal chain (steps) driving the successful implementation of the EUSDR and reaching its objectives.

In line with this model and the evaluation topics mentioned above, **six key evaluation questions (KEQ)** are formulated. The KEQs focus on **the first three levels** of the impact model (input, output, outcome), assessing if these are sufficient to achieve the desired policy changes (**level 4**) (see figure below).

Figure 3: Schematic outline of an impact model

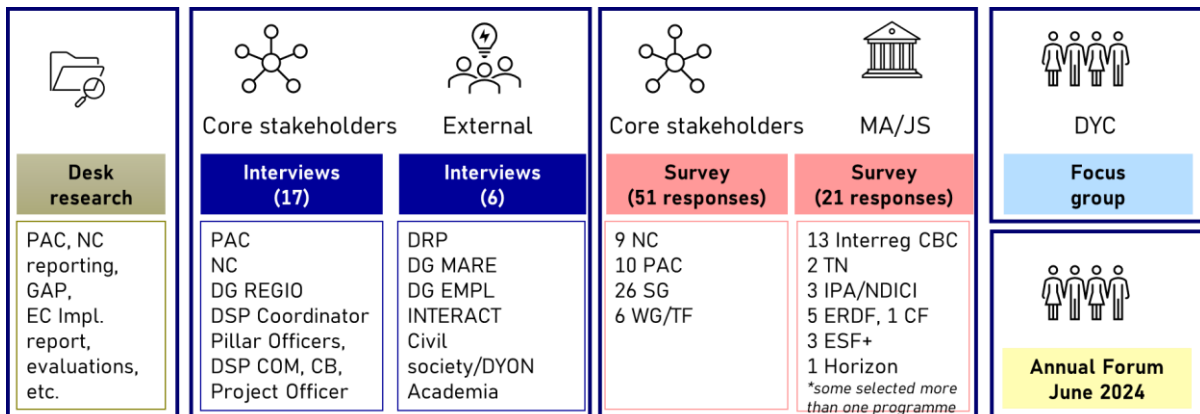


Source: M&E Factory 2024

1.3.1 Data collection and analysis phase

The evaluation team employed a mixed-methods approach, combining desk and field research (see figure below).

Figure 4: Data collection methods



Source: M&E Factory 2024

Desk research: The evaluation team reviewed several EUSDR documents, as well as other documents published by the European Commission, the European Council, the European Parliament and other relevant papers and studies (see the list of documents in Annex 5.1).

Field research:

23 interviews: 17 with the EUSDR core stakeholders and 6 with external stakeholders in the period May–August 2024 (see Annex 5.2).

Two surveys were launched addressing the:

- EUSDR core stakeholders: NCs and PACs (excluding those interviewed), SG members and WG/TF members. In total, 51 responses were received, mostly from the SG members. NCs and PACs were asked to provide consolidated responses within their team, where possible.
- Managing Authorities and Joint Secretariats (MA/JS) of the Interreg CBC/transnational, IPA/NDICI, mainstream (ERDF, CF, ESF+), Horizon programmes: The focus was on their awareness of the EUSDR, relevance of the Strategy for their programmes, cooperation with the EUSDR and its added value. In total, 21 responses were received, mostly from the CBC programmes (see Annex 2).

Online focus group with the NYC (5 July 2024): All NYC members were invited to participate. The objective was to assess the NYC's understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the Strategy and to gain a deeper understanding of their involvement.

Participation at the EUSDR Annual Forum: The evaluation team also attended the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum in June 2024, Vienna, Austria. This provided an opportunity to interact with various stakeholders (e.g., PACs, NCs, NYC, and others) and gather insights on the EUSDR implementation and the current and future challenges.

The selection of stakeholders for field research was based on a set of **criteria** designed to ensure the involvement of both core and external stakeholders, as well as representation from all four Pillars⁷.

1.4 Challenges and limitations

Overall, the EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation was implemented smoothly.

However, there were a few challenges and limitations which should be listed:

- **Stakeholder availability:** The summer period and the involvement of stakeholders from different institutions or states (e.g. PACs/PAC teams) limited the stakeholder availability during data collection. To address this, the evaluation team followed a flexible scheduling approach and method (e.g., online focus group for the NYC, flexible scheduling of interviews, long timeframe for the surveys) to ensure that all EUSDR core stakeholders are reached.
- **Consolidated answers:** For the survey responses from the PACs/PAC teams and NCs/NC teams, the evaluation team sought consolidated answers for each PAC and NC to ensure balanced representation across the PAs and states. Due to challenges in coordinating responses across different states within some PAC teams or varying perspectives on the questions posed, the evaluation team accepted more than one response from only two PACs.
- **Survey response distribution and potential bias:** Both surveys (targeting the EUSDR core stakeholders and programmes) were distributed by the DSP and covered diverse groups.

EUSDR core stakeholder survey: Responses were largely from the SG members (26 out of 51) (see Figure 4). This was partly due to the PACs/PAC teams and NCs/NC teams being asked to provide consolidated answers for balanced representation across PAs and states. To address this variation, findings in this report are presented by stakeholder group where

⁷ Detailed information about these criteria and stakeholders addressed through field research is provided in Annex 2.

applicable (e.g., Figure 8, Figure 11). Additionally, given the qualitative nature of most responses, all inputs were analysed regardless of the number of respondents.

Programme survey: The survey distributed to the MA/JS of Interreg CBC/transnational, IPA/NDICI, mainstream (ERDF, CF, ESF+), and Horizon programmes yielded a response rate dominated by Interreg CBC programmes (62% of respondents). As with the core stakeholder survey, findings in this report are in some cases presented by programme group (e.g., Figure 17, Figure 24). Additionally, it was ensured that inputs from all responding programmes were considered due to the predominantly qualitative nature of the data.

- **Uncertainty about the future EU Cohesion Policy:** The recommendations presented in this final evaluation report are based on the EU Cohesion Policy and IPA frameworks⁸ for the programming period 2021-2027, as post-2027 discussions are still ongoing at this point in time.
- **Limited baseline data from previous EUSDR evaluations,** which limited the possibility of comparative analysis for certain aspects such as the DYC/DYON (not yet established when these evaluations were conducted). Sample variation or the sampling procedure for selecting interviewees may also influence the comparison.

1.5 Structure of the report

The Final Report includes the following **key sections**:

- Executive Summary: a brief overview of the final report, tailored for a wider audience.
- Introduction: outlining the aim and scope of the EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation, the methodological approach and key methods used for this evaluation
- Findings: summarising the key information gathered from both desk and field research
- Conclusions: addressing the key evaluation questions and their sub-questions
- Recommendations: main recommendations of the experts presented in a tabular format
- Annexes: Providing supplementary information, including sources used for the evaluation, field research questions, the evaluation matrix.

The final evaluation report was consulted with the **SG DANUVAL** to gather input on the findings, draft conclusions and recommendations through a **validation workshop on 7 February 2025**, and with all **EUSDR core stakeholders** in March 2025.



This final report incorporates feedback from the validation workshop and additional input from the EUSDR core stakeholders.

⁸ The final evaluation report refers to the IPA framework as it exists at the time of the report's completion.

2 Findings

This chapter presents the key findings from the data collection process, structured according to the main evaluation topics outlined in the Terms of Reference (ToR), the EUSDR Evaluation Plan (pages 8-9), and the six Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) described above.

- **Political commitment** to the EUSDR on EU and national levels focusing on:
 - the current political commitment and possible suggestions to strengthen it,
 - best practice examples for promoting the Strategy on the political level,
 - impact and influence of high-level EUSDR meetings (e.g. Ministerial, Parliamentary) on the EUSDR and on national/regional levels,
 - impact and influence of the HLG and 4 TRIO PCY formats on the implementation of the Strategy and how these can be further enhanced in the future.
- **Governance** focusing on:
 - the roles and responsibilities among key stakeholders of the EUSDR and possible rooms for improvement,
 - workflows/processes working well and aspects that should be improved,
 - the impact of strong/well elaborated agendas (e.g. by the (TRIO) PCY) on the governance of the Strategy,
 - the involvement of the Danube Youth Council and the Danube Youth Organisations Network in the EUSDR.
- **Technical implementation and policy coordination** focusing on:
 - the involvement of stakeholders in the EUSDR/PAs/SGs and aspects to be improved,
 - cooperation (intensity) between key stakeholder groups in the EUSDR over time and how this cooperation can be further improved,
 - the main gaps prevailing in the technical implementation of the EUSDR.
- **Funding** focusing on:
 - the use of different funding sources in the programming period 2021-2027,
 - the EUSDR managing authority networks (ESF, CF/ERDF, IPA/NDICI) within the embedding of EUSDR into funding programmes,
 - cooperation among national/regional, EU and non-EU actors responsible for programming and programme implementation be ensured, in order to effectively monitor the outcomes of the aligning of EUSDR and different funding mechanisms, with special focus on synergies, avoiding overlaps and efficiency of work,
 - further developing synergies for the implementation of (strategic) projects and processes, and improvement of the information flow on implemented (strategic) projects and processes in the twelve PAs.
- **Policy impact** focusing on:
 - concrete policy impact generated by the Strategy on regional, national and EU level, including territorial differences and impacts (e.g. in EU and EU candidate countries),
 - how to generate more strategic outputs/impact in the short-, mid- and long-term,
 - how changes in EUSDR structures (e.g. for action and decision-making) and processes have influenced the policy impact.
- **External factors** influencing the implementation of the Strategy.

The green symbol [] in the following subsections indicates aspects that are working well, while the orange pen [] indicates aspects for improvement.

2.1 Political commitment

Key findings on the political commitment

Political commitment to the EUSDR



Most EUSDR core stakeholders believe political commitment has either improved or remained stable since 2020, both at the EU and national/regional levels. Higher commitment and engagement are especially seen in EU candidate countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, which view the EUSDR as a pathway to their EU accession.



A smaller portion perceives a decline, often attributed to factors like the Strategy's comparatively long existence, inconsistent engagement from key decision-makers, and EUSDR's lower priority in the national context compared to other (EU) priorities. A more proactive role from the European Commission (EC), particularly from line DGs such as DG ENEST (former DG NEAR⁹), is also expected.



Some mechanisms/good practices that the EUSDR core stakeholders have found relevant in strengthening the political commitment are EUSDR Presidencies focused on long-term priorities beyond one EUSDR Presidency cycle, more engaging EUSDR Annual Forums, regular topic-specific meetings (e.g., between the Ministries responsible for Transport infrastructure).



National political commitment is more challenging to strengthen if the NCs participating in NC/NC-PAC meetings are not equipped with a decision-making capacity.



High-Level Group meetings are not considered crucial for the EUSDR implementation or political commitment. However, such meetings as well as the four MRS TRIO Presidencies meetings/working groups organised by Interact serve as platform for all MRS and states to discuss and share experiences.

Relevance of the EUSDR Action Plan for the Danube Region



The revised EUSDR Action Plan remains relevant to the current needs and challenges in the Danube Region.



There is however a need for flexibility and adaptability in light of challenges like the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic, and future priorities of the post-2027 cohesion policy and the overall EU.



The revision process was inclusive, involving various EUSDR core stakeholders and the public, following a bottom-up approach to setting EUSDR priorities.



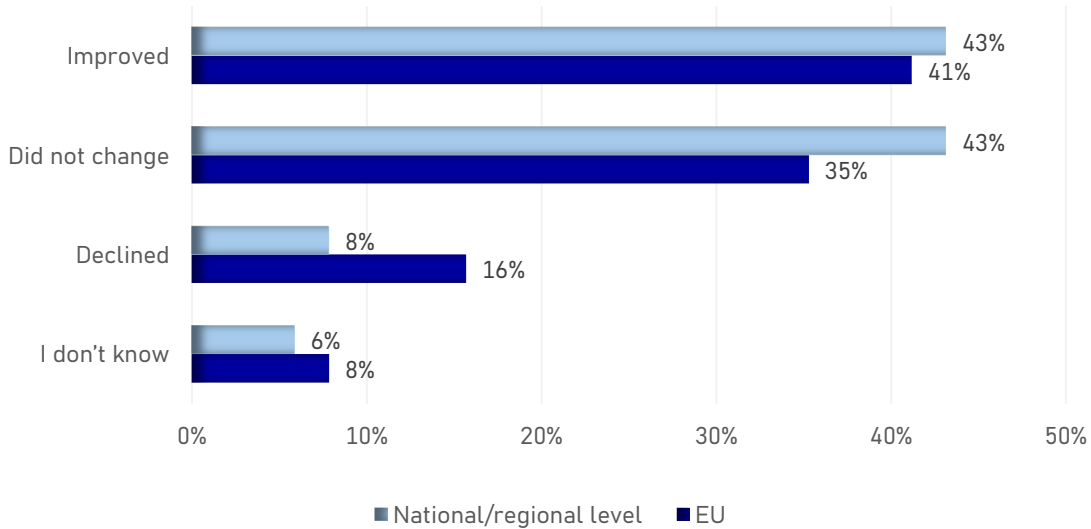
However, the complexity and time required for the revision process, coupled with the long-term perspective the EUSDR has, make frequent revisions of the EUSDR Action Plan impractical. Instead, the EUSDR Impact Evaluation 2022 suggests a "reality check" or "due diligence" at a certain point (mid-term evaluation/stocktaking), and flexible, horizontal approaches (e.g., cross-PA working formats) for greater responsiveness to challenges.

⁹ The new Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST) replaced the former Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) on 1 February 2025.

Political commitment to the EUSDR

Most of the EUSDR core stakeholders surveyed, perceive that the political commitment to the EUSDR has either **improved** after 2020 (43% for political commitment on national/regional level; 41% for political commitment on EU level), or it has remained **unchanged** (43% and 35%, respectively). A smaller percentage thinks the commitment has declined (see figure below).

Figure 5: Political commitment to the EUSDR after 2020



Source: Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July–September 2024, n = 51

The interviewed EUSDR core stakeholders share a similar perception with the surveyed EUSDR core stakeholders. They generally agree that political commitment on both EU and national/regional levels has either improved or remained stable after 2020. On national level this is especially evident in **increased Ministerial participation** in conferences and higher engagement of EU candidate countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova, which view the EUSDR as a pathway to EU accession.

On the other hand, some of the interviewed EUSDR core stakeholders **perceive a decline in the political commitment on all levels**. They attribute this to various factors, such as the Strategy's comparatively long existence (especially mentioned by stakeholders from EU MS), lack of consistent engagement from key decision-makers, EUSDR's lower priority compared to other EU or national priorities or addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, they think that the EC should take a more proactive role (e.g., higher involvement of line DGs, higher-level participation from DG REGIO, including the Commissioner at EUSDR's key events, active participation in key meetings, involvement of EC experts at the technical level).

The two figures below outline key areas proposed by the EUSDR core stakeholders to improve the political commitment on both EU and national/regional levels.

Figure 6: Key areas to improve the **EU political commitment**

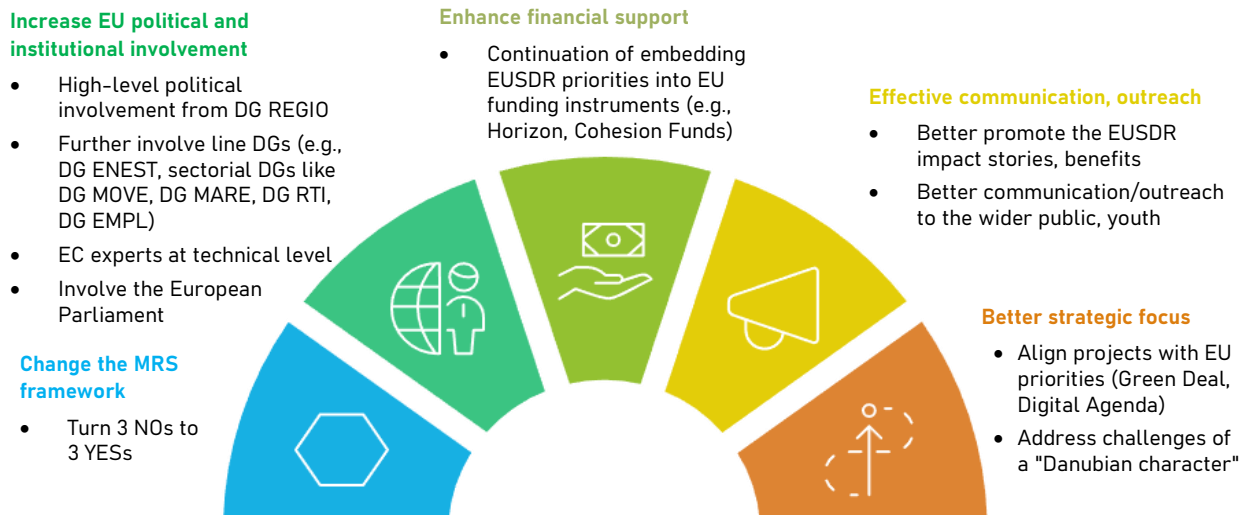
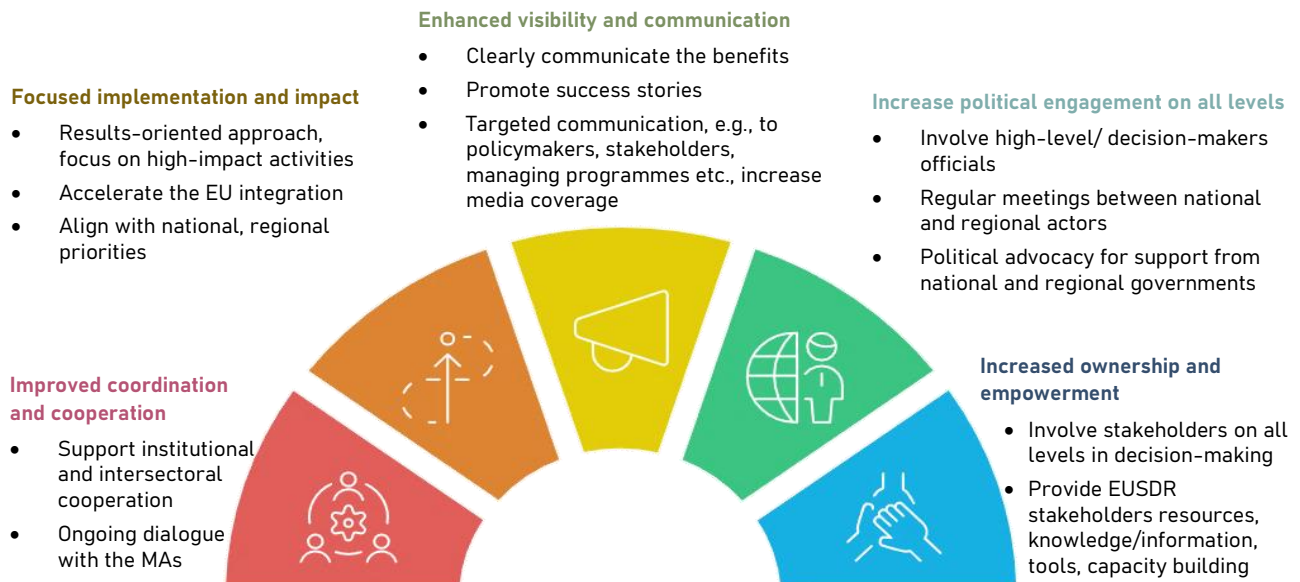


Figure 7: Key areas to improve the **national/regional political commitment**



Source: Expert analysis based on responses from one or more stakeholders during the interviews and survey conducted with the EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024

Some good practices for promoting the EUSDR on political level, as stated by the stakeholders, are:

- **Strong EUSDR Presidency (PCY)** (e.g. Austrian EUSDR PCY involved stakeholders beyond the "EUSDR family"; Ukraine was the first EU candidate country chairing the EUSDR Presidency; Slovenian EUSDR PCY was active in embedding the EUSDR into EU funding programmes 2021-2027, preparing guidance documents, and enhancing visibility and communication also at national level; Croatian EUSDR PCY with the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper)
- **EUSDR Annual Fora**, which have been often attended by high-level politicians. Some of them were even involved in the planning of the Forum (e.g., the Austrian Federal Minister for European and International Affairs)
- **Regular meetings between Ministers** of the Danube Region states (e.g. since 2014, there are regular meetings between the **Ministers** responsible for waterway mobility)
- **Use of a "letter of recommendation/letter of merit"** for project proposals (e.g., in PA 5)

EUSDR high-level meetings

On **EUSDR core stakeholder meetings (NC, PAC, NC-PAC)**, strengthening the national political commitment is seen difficult, particularly in those cases when the NCs participating in these meetings are not equipped with a decision-making capacity.

The established **written procedures** are considered as good practice to engage in internal discussions and avoid pressures. Before writing procedures in the decision making, there was no exchange about issues and decisions to be made at the meetings.

High Level Group (HLG)¹⁰ and 4 MRS TRIO Presidencies

The active participation at HLG meetings organised by the European Commission mainly comes from states within an MRS. The meetings have become less technical and more strategic and also serve as platform for the MRS and states to discuss current topics. **However, the EUSDR core stakeholders do not consider these meetings as very important for the EUSDR implementation and political commitment.** Also, as these meetings do not involve regional/local actors, there are limited chances for them to share insights on what works well or not.

In terms of four **MRS TRIO Presidencies meetings/working groups**, two types of meetings are organised:

- Four MRS TRIO Presidency meetings: They are organised and chaired by the four MRS TRIO Presidencies and take place back-to-back with the HLG meeting in Brussels.
- Cross-MRS Working Group meetings: They are organised by Interact, together with the four MRS (e.g. on monitoring and evaluation, embedding, etc.).

While such platforms offer an opportunity for all MRS to discuss and share experiences, in terms of cross-MRS cooperation, one stakeholder noted that their potential has not been fully utilised and more awareness would enhance the MRS visibility and political commitment.

Relevance of the EUSDR Action Plan for the Danube Region

The EUSDR core stakeholders deem the EUSDR Action Plan **relevant** to the needs and developments in the Danube Region (also due to its broad thematic focus) **and see no current need for revision.** As an SG member noted, the revised Plan takes account of new developments, provides more strategic guidance for the implementation and makes the Plan more compatible with other programmes and instruments.

Some interviewees however stressed the **need to better respond to changing priorities.** This is important for the current and future EU cohesion policy priorities (e.g., Agenda 2030, Green Agenda, European Bauhaus), as well as to cross-thematic external factors such as the war against Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. One interviewee emphasised the need for an instrument that enables the EUSDR Action Plan to rapidly react and adapt to external factors and/or emergency issues.

Considering **the complex and time-consuming revision process¹¹, a revision of the Plan is less desirable¹².** Instead, the EUSDR Impact Evaluation 2022 suggests a “reality check” or “due diligence” at a certain point (mid-term evaluation/stocktaking, also considering the war against Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.), and flexible, horizontal approaches (e.g., further enhancing cross-PA working formats).

¹⁰ The High-Level Group is a mandatory body (more of an advisory body for the EC) including representatives from all EU MRS.


¹¹ Impact Evaluation 2022; Interviews 2024


¹² Interviews 2024


2.2 Governance


Key findings on governance


Roles and responsibilities among the EUSDR core stakeholders

 EUSDR core stakeholders face challenges in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities due to **limited time, staff, financial resources** and **staff fluctuations**. The EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper is seen as a key tool for understanding roles, but it is perceived as complex.

 The EUSDR core stakeholders note the importance of the DSP's role in **providing support to the EUSDR core stakeholders and to the EUSDR PCIES**.


 However, they emphasise the need for increased visibility and communication, especially to politicians at national level. Core stakeholders also suggest increased support from the DSP for projects, processes, platforms, initiatives, as well as streamlining communication and information sharing among all stakeholders involved.

 **The EUSDR core stakeholders identified various good examples of well-functioning workflows and processes** such as the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, written procedures, long-term mindset of EUSDR PCIES, capacity building for newcomers, as well as the revision process of the EUSDR Action Plan.

 Main areas for improvement are better communication and more support for SG members (e.g. better access to relevant documents and content-wise introduction to their work in the EUSDR). In addition, some refinements to the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper to better clarify the roles and responsibilities and linkages between stakeholders are suggested.

The EUSDR PCIES play a key role in guiding the Strategy. Key achievements of EUSDR PCIES between 2020-2024 are:


Stronger EUSDR Presidencies focused on long-term priorities beyond one EUSDR Presidency cycle.

 Better engagement of the NCs, PACs, DYC, and of stakeholders beyond the "EUSDR family". Establishing mechanisms to improve the governance: EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, Rules of Procedures, DYC, etc.

Relevant topics (embedding, EU enlargement, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine). Ukraine as the first EU candidate country taking over/resuming the EUSDR PCY despite Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Ukraine had to temporarily resign from the EUSDR Presidency in February 2022. Due to the prompt reaction the Presidency duties were temporarily taken over by the remaining TRIO members, Slovakia and Slovenia, with support from the DSP, until Ukraine was able to resume its Presidency in May 2022.

Areas for **improvement or further consideration** are:

Increasing the engagement from higher-level EC officials from DG REGIO and line-DGs.

 Better preparation of the DYC for the EUSDR core governance meetings (e.g. to draft the DYC's position on key agenda items and ensure their active participation in discussions).

Ensuring opportunities for involvement of all PAs in the EUSDR PCY agenda and activities, while also focusing on addressing key priorities and challenges.

Moving forward with the DYON establishment and making it functional.

DYC contribution and challenges



The DYC is considered by the EUSDR stakeholders as an important platform for the institutional involvement of the youth in the EUSDR, also symbolising the maturity of the EUSDR.



Communication with the DYC was initially difficult but improved in the second year. There are differences in the DYC involvement across the PAs. Some good examples are: youth camp, session at the PA 9 stakeholder conference, thematic papers, inputs on studies, etc.



Challenges to the DYC's involvement and contribution are the limited mandate of members, complex topics requiring specific expertise, time and resource constraints, misaligned expectations between the DYC and EUSDR core stakeholders with both sides seeking more input from the other.



The DYC's impact is seen as limited, also due to their members' limited tenure, non-decision-making role and limited expertise. Even when the DYC provides input, there is no mechanism to track their uptake, decreasing the DYC members' motivation. The DYC is however a good instrument for youth engagement in the EUSDR.

Expected benefits of the DYON:



Increased involvement of youth organisations in the EUSDR (youth participation/civil society).

Better outreach to youth organisations.

Enhanced collaboration between individuals, organisations.

Higher expertise and knowledge sharing on specific topics, country-specific information about the current situation in their states.

Reach out to and empower youth in under-represented areas.

Main aspects to consider for the DYON cooperation

Define its role: strategic or thematic collaboration at PA level.



Manage expectations: delays, varied motivations among different organisations.

Identify potential funding sources to support DYON's activities in the EUSDR.

Organisation: define a clear operational plan, roles, relationship with the EUSDR PCIES.

Collaboration between the DYON and the DYC

Establish a mechanism for coordination and information exchange.



DYC can help launch DYON activities, inform them of strategic developments, while DYON can provide expertise and involve them in projects since the DYC lacks legal personality.

Measuring and reporting progress

Main challenges and areas for improvement for the PACs:



Frequent and excessive reporting consumes time and resources (bi-annual reporting to the Interreg DRP and to some extent the biennial reporting to the EUSDR).

Limited resources: Insufficient staff, resources to collect, analyse and report data (bi-annual reporting to the Interreg DRP and biennial reporting to the EUSDR).

Data gaps: use of quantitative data to support narrative reporting (bi-annual reporting to the Interreg DRP and to some extent biennial reporting to the EUSDR).



Engaging stakeholders, particularly SGs, to provide information and support (bi-annual reporting to the Interreg DRP and biennial reporting to the EUSDR)

Understanding the reporting purpose and use of collected data (biennial reporting to the EUSDR).

Main challenges and areas for improvement for the **NCs** (biennial reporting to the EC):



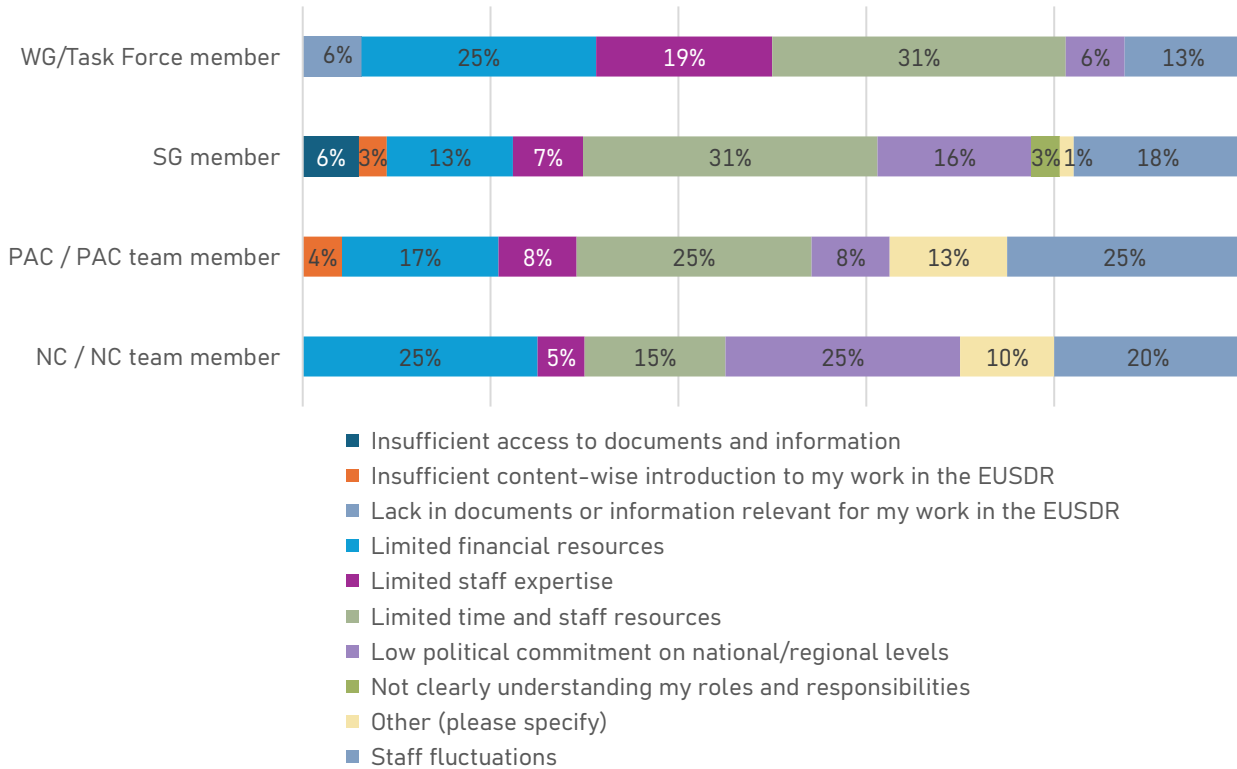
- Limited resources: Insufficient human resources.
- Data gaps: Lack of information on SG meetings and project progress within PAs.
- Improve communication and coordination between NCs and PAs.
- Higher focus of reporting on the actual implementation and impact of macro-regional cooperation (tangible results), rather than on governance.

Roles and responsibilities among the EUSDR core stakeholders

The EUSDR core stakeholders see **limited financial resources, staff fluctuations and limited time and human resources** as key challenges in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. Some NCs/PACs have shown, however, good examples of dealing with staff fluctuations (e.g., onboarding activities, involving experts from other divisions to fill their gaps). Other key challenges include limited expertise and low political commitment on national/regional level (see figure below).

SG members also mention the insufficient access to relevant documents/information or not clearly understanding their role in the EUSDR. There is also low involvement of the SGs members due to limited resources, especially from EU candidate countries. Some PACs cover travel costs for their SGs members to be able to join their events.

Figure 8: Main challenges in fulfilling your roles and responsibilities in the EUSDR



Source: Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024 (multiple selection possible: n = 127; 20 NCs, 24 PACs, 67 SGs, 16 WG/Task Force members). The responses of SG members do not sum up to 100% due to rounding of decimal values.

On the DSP role and support, the following aspects are mentioned by the EUSDR core stakeholders.

Strengths	Areas for improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• supporting the coordination between the EUSDR (TRIO) PCIES and their handover process• serving as an intermediary between the EUSDR stakeholders• supporting the decision-making process• supporting cross-Pillar/-PA cooperation, including joint meetings, e.g., with PA 11 (border police) and PA 6 (biodiversity)• ensuring institutional memory within the Strategy• organising onboarding activities/sessions for newcomers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• streamlining communication and avoiding information overflow• unclear how the DSP shares roles between offices in Austria and Romania• general onboarding session; PAs prefer to tailor them to their stakeholders (e.g., SG)• more project support/guidance (e.g. preparation, implementation, reporting)• guidance to PACs on looking for funds• less time for work if too much reporting• better communicating the request for input to survey/evaluation (aim, target groups, etc)• evaluation may be contracted by a third party e.g. DG REGIO; however, another core stakeholder noted this may be unrealistic, as it would require a similar approach for other MRS, while the EUSDR already has the SG DANUVAL in place.

Source: Expert analysis based on responses from one or more stakeholders during the interviews and survey conducted with the EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024.

Workflows/processes

Main EUSDR workflows/processes **working well**, as highlighted by the EUSDR core stakeholders, are:

- **EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper¹³**: It describes and defines the roles and responsibilities of the EUSDR core stakeholders, which is especially crucial given the number of states involved in the EUSDR. The paper has also helped to define a clear EUSDR PCY rotation system (see NC Rules of Procedure). Before that, there was lack of interest from some EUSDR members to assume the chairmanship of the EUSDR. The EUSDR core stakeholders (i.e. the NCs, PACs, SGs via the PACs) were invited to contribute to the development and revision of the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper.
- **Written procedures**: Before procedures for decision making processes were rather formalised in written procedures, there was limited exchange about issues and decisions were foreseen to be made at the meetings. These procedures (also triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic) made the process more transparent: only the items on the agenda, as agreed with the PCY, are discussed during the meeting and then a document (meeting minutes) is shared for everyone involved to comment on it. The decision-making processes can also be followed retrospectively, which increases the engagement in the Strategy.
- **Smooth decision making at NC level compared to other MRS (noted by one EUSDR core stakeholder)**, which they attribute to the fact that the EUSDR is among the oldest MRS (e.g. older than the EUSAIR, EUSALP), making the system widely accepted. Other core stakeholders also consider the DSP to be stable and mature, which eases the processes.
- **Long-term mindset of the EUSDR PCIES and their agendas**: The EUSDR PCY is now considered as a long-term process and not an annual task. Moreover, there is a better coordination of the PCY with the NCs and PACs.

¹³ While the "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Union Strategy for Danube Region COM (2010) 715" provides general information on the governance (e.g. on page 12), it does not provide detailed descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of all EUSDR core stakeholders. These are specifically outlined in the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper.

- **Revision process of the EUSDR Action Plan:** The process was perceived as well-functioning, ensuring a bottom-up approach in establishing the EUSDR priorities¹⁴. A two-stage consultation process involved the PACs, SGs, and NCs, and the public (via an online consultation and public hearing) to collect feedback on past actions, identify future cooperation fields, and propose revisions to the EUSDR Action Plan¹⁵. The revision process was however considered complex and time-consuming¹⁶, making an immediate revision of the EUSDR Action Plan currently less desirable¹⁷.
- Other workflows/processes that support the implementation of the EUSDR are: **capacity building¹⁸ for newcomers** such as 'Unfolding EUSDR workshops' (e.g., for PACs, NCs), with the Republic of Moldova being very active in asking for such workshops and ABC Toolkit; other workshops, presentations delivered by the Pillar Officers in SG meetings; and **existence of an INTRANET** for institutional memory, knowledge management in the Strategy.

However, even within these well-functioning workflows and processes, EUSDR core stakeholders highlighted the **need for further improvements or refinements**, such as:

- **Making the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper less technical** in terms of formulation of roles and responsibilities (some stakeholders still perceive it as technical and complex after the revision in November 2023). The roles and responsibilities for some stakeholders are briefly described, while others are longer. The lack of understanding is also related to the staff fluctuations or to how the information is shared on national level, with people being appointed without knowing about the Strategy. Additionally, there are many roles assigned to the NCs, PACs and SGs in the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, which may not be completely fulfilled and require improvement. For example, the role of SG members nationally, how they communicate, their capacities, political background, as well as the diverse representation of stakeholders (e.g., SG members in the EUSDR are mostly part of national authorities, while in other MRS some are from agencies, universities, city councils, NGOs, etc.) need to be considered.
Revising the PAC roles is also mentioned. PACs' coordination function is not correctly shown in the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper figure. In addition, the link between PACs and WG needs to be interrelated.
- **Reducing the information overflow and improve information exchange:** PACs receive a lot of information/e-mails, making it hard to keep track of the actions they have to implement. One of the interviewed stakeholders proposes weekly newsletters with a list of to-do points.

EUSDR elaborated agendas by the (TRIO) PCY

According to the Strategy EUSDR core stakeholders, the **EUSDR PCIES agenda** (and their level of ambition) plays a key role in guiding the Strategy. Each EUSDR PCY sets priorities aligned with existing events and their national interests. One stakeholder noted that even when EUSDR PCY priorities are driven by national interest, raising awareness of these priorities shows to other states how they can be implemented within the EUSDR.

There is an overall perception that there **are stronger EUSDR PCIES and agendas post-2020**. Priorities are set for longer periods and are better reflecting a multi-annual agenda for macro-regional cooperation and current developments, e.g., EU enlargement, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, embedding. Other thematic priorities were also covered such as employment (e.g., Ukrainian EUSDR PCY), environmental protection and security. The need to put more emphasis on transport was however noted by one EUSDR core stakeholder.

¹⁴ Metis Operational evaluation

¹⁵ DSP EUSDR Implementation Report_2019.pdf

¹⁶ Impact Evaluation 2022; Interviews with the EUSDR stakeholders 2024

¹⁷ Interviews with the EUSDR stakeholders 2024

¹⁸ The DSP conducted a capacity building needs assessment addressing the joint cooperation between SGs, PACs and NCs.

Main contributions of the post-2020 EUSDR PCIES as highlighted by the Strategy stakeholders are:

- stronger EUSDR Presidency and agenda contributing to attracting attention to the EUSDR
- long-term mindset, which is considered necessary for promoting the EUSDR topics
- the Croatian EUSDR PCY with the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper
- Ukraine as the first EU candidate country taking over and resuming the EUSDR Presidency (also despite the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine)
- Slovakia's contribution to organising an EUSDR Annual Forum on its territory in Košice due to the extraordinary circumstances in Ukraine
- the Slovenian EUSDR PCY in the embedding, guidance documents¹⁹, revised EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, updated Rules of Procedures, etc.
- the Austrian EUSDR PCY involved stakeholders beyond the "EUSDR family". The Slovenian and Austrian PCIES also promoted the thematic exchange between stakeholders and PACs

In terms of areas for **improvement**, the stakeholders mentioned the following:

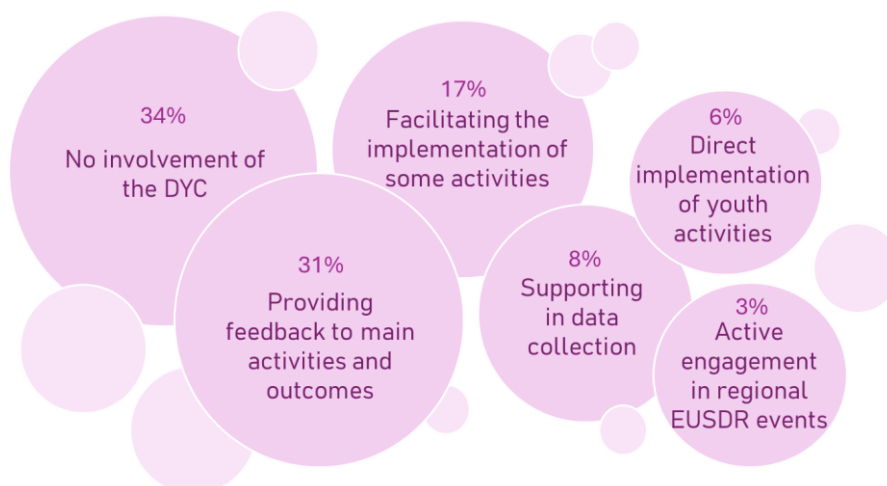
- improving the communication of EUSDR's success stories, highlighting the EUSDR impact
- involving higher-level EC officials, also beyond DG REGIO
- ensuring the opportunity for involvement of all PAs in the EUSDR PCY agenda and activities
- moving forward with the DYON establishment and making it functional
- ensuring the DYC is well prepared for the EUSDR core governance meetings, e.g. EUSDR PCY could meet in advance with the DYC

Youth involvement and contribution to the EUSDR

The Danube Youth Council (DYC) is considered by the EUSDR core stakeholders as a **valuable platform** for the institutional involvement of the youth in the EUSDR, also symbolising the EUSDR's **maturity**. **However, the DYC involvement varies depending on individual DYC members and PAs.**

A high share of the surveyed EUSDR core stakeholders see no involvement of the DYC in their work. For others, the DYC members were involved, such as by providing feedback and input (e.g., at PAC meetings, SG meetings²⁰, etc.), and/or facilitating the implementation of some activities (see below).

Figure 9: Involvement and contribution of the DYC to the EUSDR

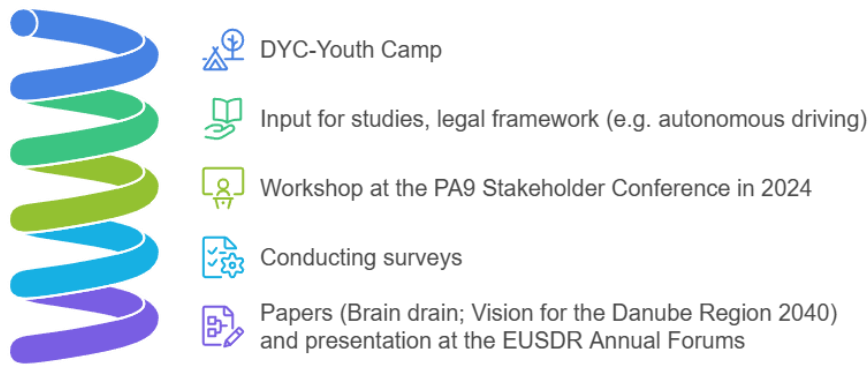


Source: Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024 (multiple selection: n = 64)

¹⁹ e.g. [„Empowering countries and regions for stronger involvement in the EUSDR“](#) – for the NCs and PACs

²⁰ PA 8 offers their DYC members participation at SG meetings and other events covering their travel and accommodation costs (hence voluntarily exceeding the minimum requirement of funding one DYC member's attendance at one meeting per year).

Some good practices of the **DYC involvement and contribution** are presented below:



Source: Expert analysis based on the *DYC focus group, interviews, survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024*

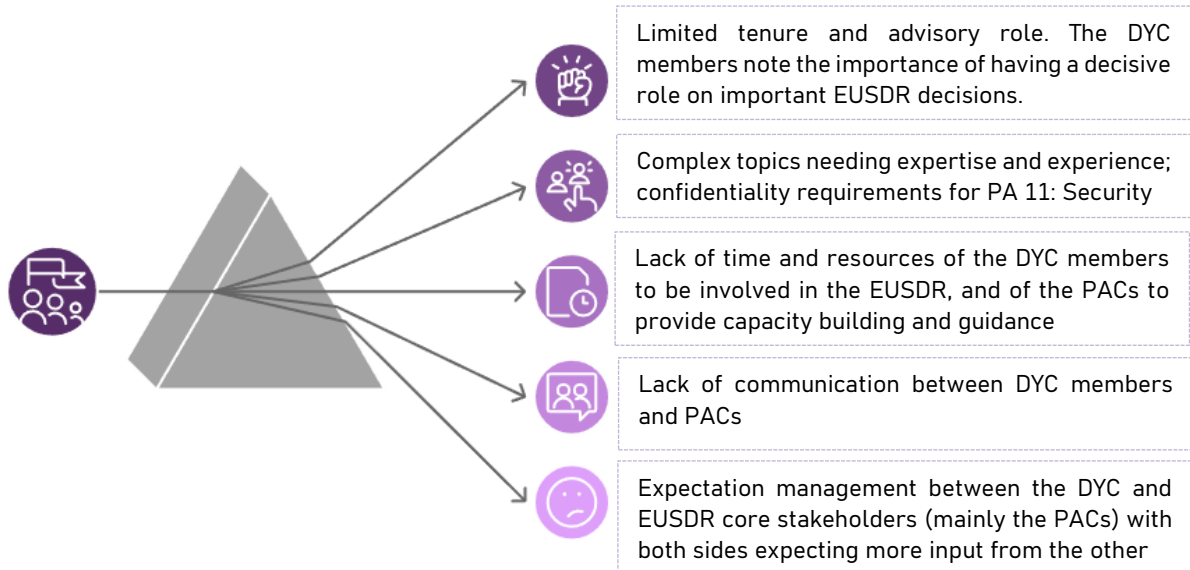
The **DYC is however more perceived as an initiative with limited concrete impact, also due to its limited tenure and advisory role.** Some of the interviewed EUSDR core stakeholders noted that the 2022-2024 period focused mainly on **raising awareness** of the **DYC** rather than bringing topics, call to actions etc. to the other EUSDR core stakeholders. However, in cases when they provide inputs (e.g. papers on brain drain and Danube Region Vision 2040), there is a lack of mechanism to track the uptake of the **DYC** inputs, which decreases their motivation.

One stakeholder stressed that while the **DYC** members are young and may lack experience, their involvement contributes to **raising young talents** that can be engaged in the EUSDR in the future.

Two of the interviewed **NCs** see the involvement of the **DYC** as **more practical at the PA level than at the NC level**, particularly in terms of their involvement in operational activities in specific fields (e.g. research, studies, workshops). For **PACs**, cooperation with the **DYC** is valuable in enabling the **DYC** members to learn in a specific field and thus, helping them prepare for a later stage in their career. Additionally, **DYC** members can provide other perspectives and forward-looking insights on various **PAC** activities.

On the other hand, two **DYC** members participating in the focus group noted that cooperation with the **NCs** may also be relevant to allow for higher involvement on national level. Another EUSDR core stakeholder emphasised the need for better communication between the **DYC** and **PACs** and with the **NCs**, while also noting that the **DYC** should represent youth as a whole rather than individual states.

Challenges the EUSDR stakeholders see regarding **DYC** involvement and contribution are listed below:



Source: *DYC focus group, Interviews, Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members (n=51), 2024*

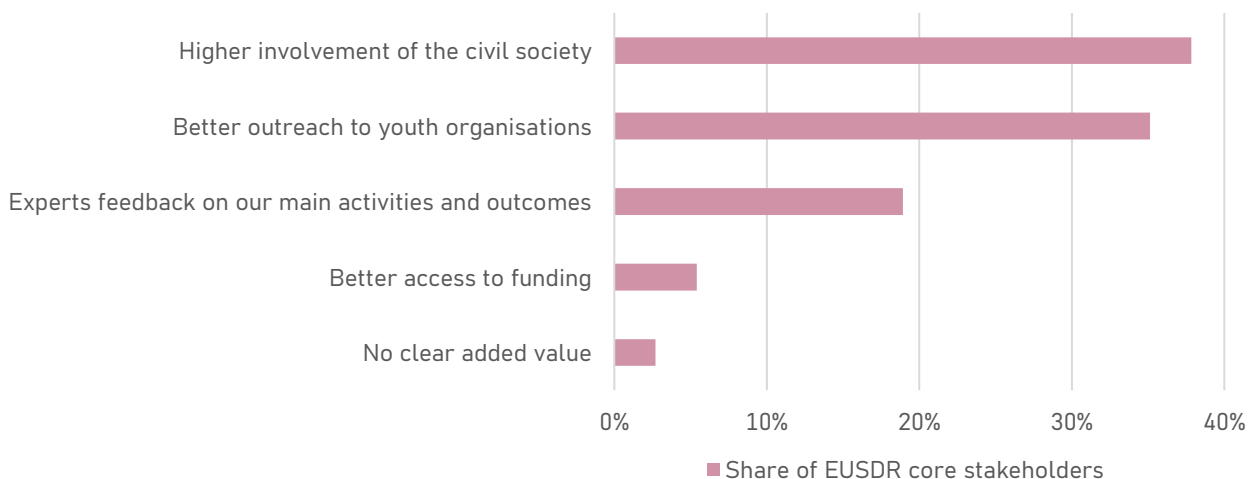
The EUSDR core stakeholders (including the DYC members) suggest **some improvement**, such as:

- Clear **mechanisms to track and communicate the uptake and impact** of the DYC inputs
- **Horizontal instead of thematic involvement of the DYC**, and **expansion of the scope of discussion** in relevant topics related to environment, transport in 20–30 years, etc.
- **Regular exchange between PACs** on their collaboration with the DYC to share experiences
- **Higher involvement of the DYC members in the EUSDR implementation at the PA level** (e.g., implementation of their own projects, activities, speaker/moderator at EUSDR events)
- **Capacity building**: exchange programmes to better familiarise with the EUSDR and grow interculturality²¹. Deeper exchange with other youth councils from other MRS would also be relevant
- DYC involvement to be part of **monitoring and evaluation activities** at PA level. Currently, two DYC members can voluntarily be part of SG DANUVAL.
- **Clear guidance, especially on the core governance meetings**. DYC could be better prepared for meetings by having discussions with the EUSDR PCY beforehand. The DYC itself could also benefit from internal discussions to align on its priorities and expectations from the PCY.

The **Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON)** aims to offer a platform for youth organisations to voluntarily cooperate and share their experiences. The DYON is to be understood as an open network, i.e., not restricted to a number of members per state and no obligation for states to delegate members.

As the DYON is yet to be fully operationalised²², the EUSDR core stakeholders were asked about its potential contribution to the EUSDR. Most of them expect the DYON to contribute to a higher involvement of civil society and better outreach to youth organisations. Some see it as a platform for sharing expertise on specific topics (e.g., biodiversity²³), bottom-up ideas, capitalisation, or access to funding (e.g., via projects).

Figure 10: Potential contribution of the DYON to the EUSDR



Source: Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July–September 2024, n = 37

The interviewed EUSDR stakeholders have alike expectations of the DYON contribution. One sees the DYON as the next step of the DYC, including not only young people but also representatives in youth policy. Another stakeholder suggests a **Danube Youth Parliament** as a platform for youth cooperation.

²¹ Suggested example: Franco–German youth office <https://www.fgyo.org/homepage>

²² The DYON was established in September 2024. Please see <https://danube-region.eu/dyon/>

²³ e.g. <https://www.gybn.org/>

Additional contributions noted from the representative of one NGO (part of DYON) interviewed are:

- providing reliable country-specific information (e.g. about the real situation in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine)
- strengthening connections with universities in cities of the Danube Region
- supporting the exchange of experiences and ideas
- reaching out to important but isolated settlements in the Danube Region.

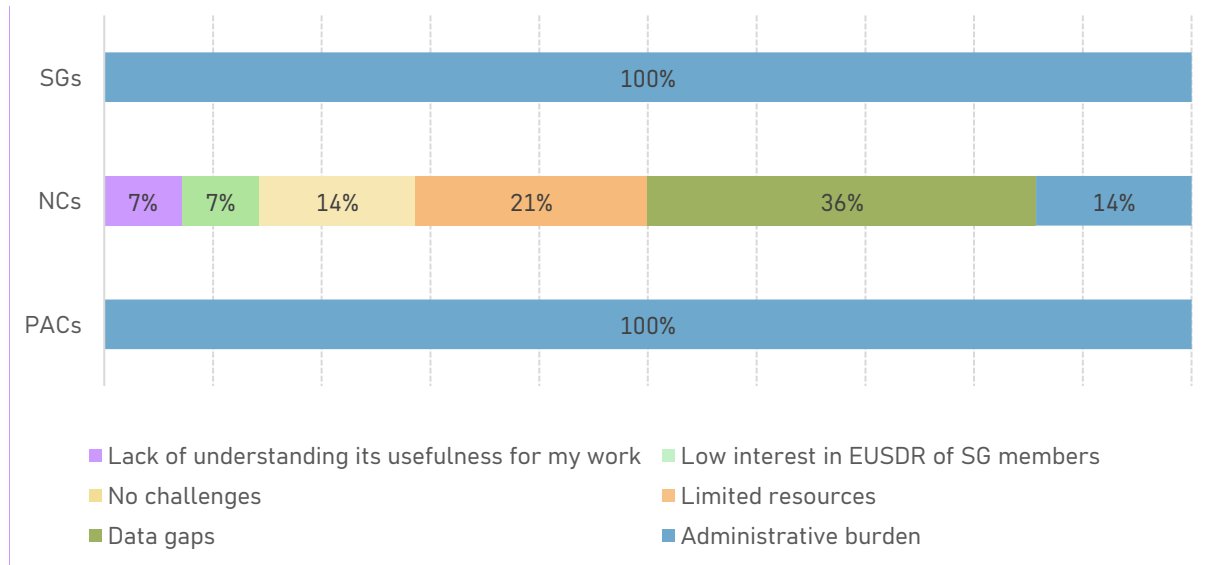
The **establishment of the DYON requires careful consideration** of several aspects such as defining:

- its role (strategic or thematic). One stakeholder thinks that DYON’s work and contribution may be difficult at the PA level, suggesting a more general engagement instead
- clear technical operational plan before inviting organisations, who will lead and organise the DYON. One interviewee suggests keeping it flexible with decisions left to organisations, especially if there is no formal support or funding. Another proposes the DSP to organise it
- funding sources to support DYON’s activities in the EUSDR
- the relationship with the EUSDR core stakeholders, such as with the PCY, or the DYC to avoid duplication of efforts and fostering effective communication and collaboration
- managing expectations due to establishment delays, varied motivation and experience levels among participants, and the range of organisations and individuals involved in the DYON.

Measuring and reporting progress

The PACs see measuring and reporting important but also as an administrative burden (especially reporting to the Interreg DRP). For the NCs (who solely report to the EC/DG REGIO directly), the main challenges are related to data gaps and their limited resources. The NCs appear to perceive a lesser reporting burden compared to the PACs.²⁴

Figure 11: Challenges in measuring and reporting progress



Source: Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024 (multiple selection possible: n = 22; 7 PACs, 14 NCs, 1 SG)

²⁴ The NCs receive the questions from the EC, while the PACs receive the questions from the EC, supplemented by questions from the DSP that relate to the operational implementation in the PAs.

The PACs raise the following **concerns** on reporting their progress:

- administrative burden due to frequent reporting and volume of reporting, not allowing sufficient time for project work
- limited resources to collect, analyse and report data
- staff changes, which requires more time to integrate new people on what and how to do it
- difficulties to receive information from other stakeholders, such as SG members
- data gaps and lack of qualitative data, especially for complex or “soft” topics like cooperation
- understanding the benefits of reporting and follow-ups

In this regard, they propose the **following improvements**:

- streamline and simplify reporting, and avoid repetitive questions
- engage other stakeholders, especially SGs, to support the PACs with information on the progress and follow-up activities. One PA mentioned interministerial meetings with the NC.
- use quantitative data to support reporting and highlight success stories to show the impact
- clear questions: capacity building may be provided as necessary
- clarify the purpose of the data collected and their use/follow-up
- mandatory number of characters for the mandatory questions to get more valid answers.

In addition to the PAC reporting coordinated by the DSP, PA 9 has established the “**Danube Region Monitor – People and Skills**”²⁵ as a tool for observing and recording the developments in the fields of education, training and labour market in the Danube Region, making the data available to the public and overall, for supporting evidence-based policy making.

The NC reporting is directly coordinated by DG REGIO, which biennially prepares the MRS implementation report for the European Parliament and the Council. The MRS implementation report is considered useful to enhance the MRS visibility and is a basis for the Council to take stock of what they supported, make conclusions for further work etc, as well as to develop the political agenda for the MRS themselves.

From the EC’s side, the input provided by the NCs for the MRS implementation report is overall considered very good.

From the NC’s side, the main challenges in measuring and reporting progress are:

- insufficient administrative capacity and human resources
- lack of information, e.g., on SG meetings within PAs, or from the line ministries to the NCs on PA activities (e.g., what is being discussed within different PAs, implementation of projects)
- NCs and PACs noted that the focus should be on the impact of macro-regional cooperation. While reporting on governance is important, the focus should be on tangible results and progress.

²⁵ <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/danube-region-monitor/>, <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/danube-region-monitor-2/>

2.3 Technical implementation and policy coordination

Key findings on technical implementation and policy coordination

Stakeholder involvement and cooperation - within the EUSDR core stakeholders



The involvement of and interaction among EUSDR core stakeholders have improved since 2020.



However, stakeholders note that there is still room for improvement, especially on national level such as alignment of national priorities with the EUSDR and better coordination within the NC teams and other national institutions. National coordination platforms (e.g. in Austria, Hungary, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, Czech Republic etc.) are seen as good examples. Also, there is a need for improved interaction and information sharing between the NCs, PACs and SGs.

Stakeholder involvement and cooperation - with external stakeholders



The involvement of and cooperation with external stakeholders in the EUSDR have seen positive developments and areas for improvement.



While there have been efforts to strengthen relationships with some EU institutions in the past years (e.g. DG MARE, DG EMPL, European Parliament), civil society (e.g., via Danube Participation Days), the need for further progress is highlighted by all stakeholders (e.g., involvement of line DGs such as DG ENEST, regional and local actors, politicians, etc).

Technical implementation of the EUSDR



The EUSDR core stakeholders stress various challenges to the EUSDR implementation such as weakened strategic focus, PACs being focused more on the technical implementation of PAC projects than on coordination, low involvement of the SGs, staff turnover, financial constraints and administrative burden linked to funding, meeting expectations initially raised about the EUSDR, translating the EUSDR Action Plan and its objectives into concrete activities, and information flow on Danube Strategy Flagships.

Communication of the EUSDR



Despite initial challenges related to the discontinuity of the DSP's work (before September 2018), resource constraints and staff turnover, the past 4-5 years have showed improvement in communication (e.g. impact stories, social media, intranet etc.).



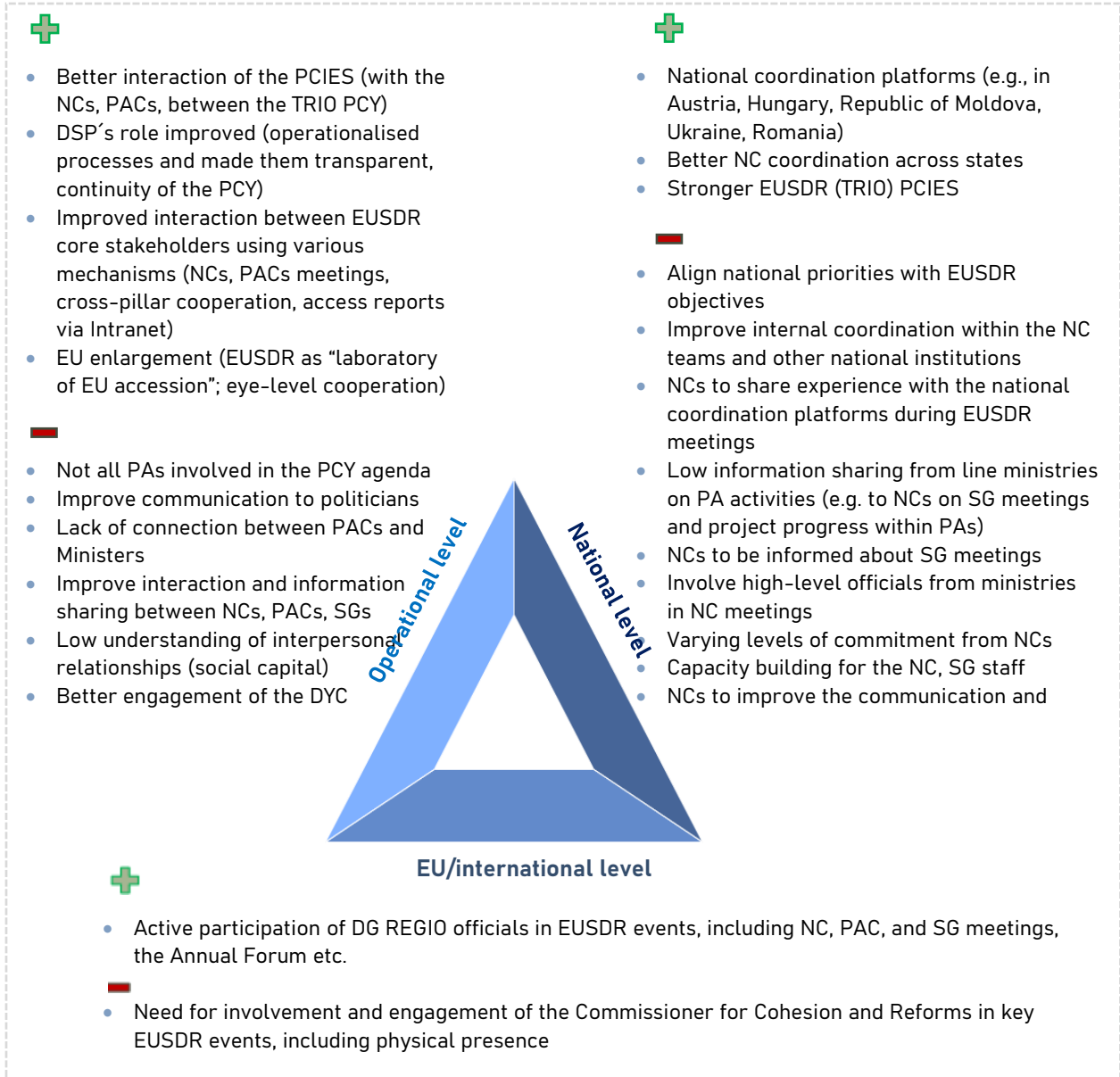
Nevertheless, reaching the political level remains a challenge, requiring an active role of EUSDR core stakeholders (especially the NCs) and to leverage national coordination platforms or other actors as information multipliers.

Stakeholder involvement and cooperation - within the EUSDR core stakeholders

Many EUSDR core stakeholders highlight that the involvement and interaction within the EUSDR core stakeholders in 2020-2024 **have improved**. There are however some stakeholders who believe that there has **been no significant change, especially on national level**.

The figure below highlights **some positive developments and areas for improvement**.

Figure 12: positive developments and areas for improvement for the stakeholder involvement and cooperation within the EUSDR core stakeholders

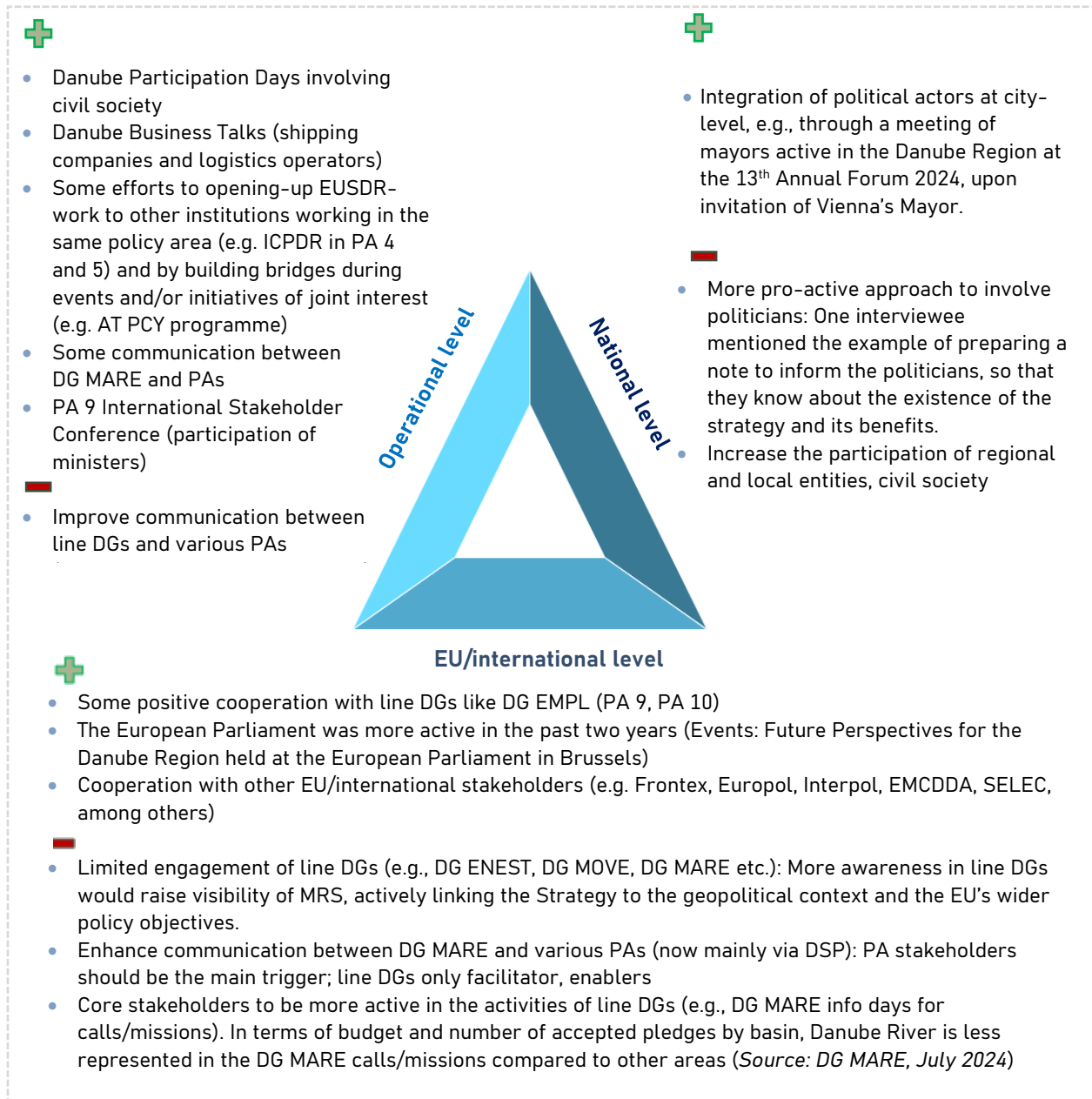


Source: Expert analysis based on responses from one or more stakeholders during the interviews and survey conducted with the EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024.

Stakeholder involvement and cooperation – with external stakeholders

The EUSDR core stakeholders outline the following positive developments in the involvement and cooperation with external stakeholders in the past five years as well as some areas for improvement to maximise the EUSDR’s contribution to the Danube Region and increase political commitment (see figure below).

Figure 13: positive developments and areas for improvement for the stakeholder involvement and cooperation with external stakeholders



Source: Expert analysis based on responses from one or more stakeholders during the interviews and survey conducted with the EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024.

Technical implementation of the EUSDR

In terms of specific aspects of the implementation of the EUSDR activities and role of the stakeholders, the following aspects are mainly mentioned by the EUSDR core stakeholders:

- **Strategic focus:** The actual policy-impact and topics of the EUSDR have lost track and in some cases became too (PAC) project-oriented. While the interaction level is good, the strategic focus has weakened.
- **Role of the PACs:** PACs have become as beneficiary under the Danube Region Programme, especially due to the financing structures and its requirements. Instead of focusing more on strategic coordination issues (engaging with the SGs, project developers to identify potential opportunities and challenges), they focus on operational details/projects.
- **Low involvement of the SGs,** especially due to limited (time, financial) resources. The PACs struggle in some cases to actively involve SG members in their events (e.g., SG meetings, conferences) or implementation activities, especially from EU candidate countries. To mitigate this, some PACs cover travel and accommodation costs for the SG participants. However, as noted during the SG DANUVAL validation workshop on 7 February 2025, covering these costs does not always effectively enhance SG engagement (e.g., some SG members leave the Strategy, or others may prefer online participation, which incurs no additional costs).

Some PACs mentioned that if the SG members are active and engaging and get in touch with their national/regional stakeholders (e.g., pushing and taking the lead for initiatives, projects, cross border services), this could reduce the burden on PACs. The more this workload shifts towards the PACs the more resources are needed.

- **Administrative burden linked to funding:** Since PAC funding is strongly related to the Interreg programmes (DRP), it is more administrative burden, because PACs have to be flexible enough and organise their work as a project, although they might be involved in other activities which are not always visible and easy to receive funding (e.g., processes, networks, platforms).
- **Resource constraints** to finance and implement activities. The stakeholders also note the importance of understanding the local problems and their available financial sources.
- **Manage expectations:** Initially, there was a high expectation and ambition, which has partly been lost – initiatives are needed to rejuvenate and reignite the Strategy in order to pick up the momentum. There needs to be constant political commitment.
- **Staff turnover,** especially of people who are experts and have driven the EUSDR activities (e.g., among SGs, project promoters, organisations that are part of EUSDR networks, etc.).
- **Difficulties in translating the EUSDR Action Plan and its objectives into concrete activities.** The Danube Strategy Flagships are a good example of cooperation, especially across PAs. The DSP together with the PAs have initiated a process of updating the Danube Strategy Flagship project/processes. However, some stakeholders note that the information flow on Danube Strategy Flagships across the PAs needs improvement (e.g. by continuously disseminating information about new Danube Strategy Flagship projects/processes across the PAs).
- **Explore more opportunities of involving the EUSDR in existing formal policy processes** (e.g., the EU enlargement process in the Western Balkans, the Trans-European Transport Network).

In addition, **better alignment of national priorities with the EUSDR priorities remains essential.** The PAC and NC reports highlight some good examples of integrating EUSDR priorities into national strategies, action plans and sectoral policy documents. During the Slovenian EUSDR Presidency, a key horizontal objective was to strengthen macro-regional cooperation not only on macro-regional but also on national level. Efforts focused on consolidating all stakeholders involved in the EUSDR implementation, leading to good progress in enhancing the active involvement of Slovenian

stakeholders, and thus better alignment and streamlining of their national objectives across various PAs. Cross-PA cooperation can also support this process, e.g. joint working group between PA 1a (Inland Waterways) and PA 11 (Security) focusing on the simplification, harmonisation and digitalisation of administrative processes connected to Danube navigation.

However, challenges like national prioritisation, political dynamics and differing governmental structures and capacities in each state can pose limitations. Additionally, engagement and exchange on regional and local levels remain limited. As core stakeholders noted, generating interest on these levels is still challenging, as financial support for local and regional projects is often the primary motivation.

As previously mentioned, national inter-institutional coordination platforms for EU macro-regional strategies remain a good approach for facilitating regular, multi-sided information exchange among ministries and strengthening coordination on national level. However, these platforms should be aligned with the administrative structures and arrangements in each state.

Communication of the EUSDR

Initially, the discontinuity of the DSP's work before its re-establishment in September 2018, along with resource constraints and staff turnover, hindered the smooth functioning of the Strategy, including its institutional memory and communication.

Recent years have seen progress, with various activities carried out such as:

- Externally: social media, website, Danube Strategy Flagships list²⁶, video shooting to promote Danube Strategy Flagships, brochures, online campaigns targeting specific groups such as politicians, experts. The last two EUSDR PCIES (Slovenia, Austria) were especially active in communicating impact stories
- Internally: internal newsletter, mailing list, Intranet

There are however some aspects that are mentioned by several stakeholders to improve communication, especially to external stakeholders:

- Reaching out to **national/regional politicians** to communicate the benefits of the EUSDR remains a challenge. **Impact stories** are especially important in this regard.
- Core stakeholders, especially NCs, PACs and SG members are key to promote stories on national and thematic level. The role of the **NC** is especially important given that the EUSDR covers 14 states and different languages. National coordination platforms or other actors (e.g., MA/JS of programmes, project beneficiaries etc.) are considered as good **information multipliers**. One EUSDR stakeholder mentioned one example where one project beneficiary promoted the EUSDR more than the Programme under which the project was funded. Additionally, from a governance perspective, the PACs have a transnational, macro-regional role that can help to communicate on a macro-regional level.
- **Physical presence of high-level officials/politicians** at events (e.g., EUSDR Annual Forum) is considered important for visibility, especially from the media. Other events or platforms to target politicians on EU and national levels were also considered useful.

²⁶ <https://danube-region.eu/projects-and-funding/eusdr-strategic-projects/>

2.4 Funding

Key findings on funding

EUSDR embedding tools



The EUSDR has developed various tools and guidelines to support embedding, including the EUSDR Embedding Tools and Guidance Papers.



However, many programmes are not aware of them or have not used them.

Absorption of funding sources in 2021-2027



The EUSDR relies strongly on the Interreg DRP for funding, and it is well-represented in the Interreg DRP Monitoring Committee. While the DRP is generally considered an accessible funding source, some PACs report challenges with the administrative burden of reporting.



Additional support is also provided from other Interreg programmes and EU centrally managed programmes such as Horizon Europe/Horizon 2020, COSME, LIFE, Erasmus+, EaSI, etc. However, there is a need to more clearly articulate the benefits to them of supporting EUSDR's activities, and better formulation of EUSDR's demands (concrete steps and benefits).

EUSDR MA networks (ESF+, CF/ERDF, IPA III/NDICI)



Many programmes are part of networks or structured dialogues with the EUSDR, leading to various benefits such as enhanced cooperation to exchange ideas and experiences, synergies, increased visibility, access to information on macro-regional strategies and programmes of macro-regional relevance through regular meetings between CBC programmes facilitated by the national coordination platforms.



Yet, there are also many programmes that are not part of such networks or dialogues (e.g. some Interreg CBC and ERDF programmes). While programme participation in some MA networks, such as the ESF MA network, is functional, it remains inconsistent in others.

Future cooperation between the EUSDR and different programmes



For the 2021-2027 and post-27 periods, the programmes outline some activities where cooperation with the EUSDR is relevant for them: developing the post-2027 programme strategies, promoting programme calls and results through the EUSDR, coordinating with other programmes and funding mechanisms, and capitalisation of their results.

Potential EUSDR support for their work and the embedding process include: activities/tools to better understand their benefits, joint activities for beneficiaries, preparation of joint calls, use of EUSDR MA networks, harmonisation of capitalisation strategies.



On the other hand, their proposed approaches/triggers to enhance programme contribution to the EUSDR are: closer cooperation between EUSDR stakeholders, MAs, and regional/local stakeholders, financial incentives for transnational projects, closer monitoring of project results by EUSDR stakeholders, proactive approach, especially in EU enlargement, strengthened dialogue, use of existing projects from other MRS to bridge the gap and involve programmes in the EUSDR, or higher programme budget.

Coherence



The EUSDR Action Plan is strongly aligned with the EU Cohesion Policy and EU integration goals. To ensure continued alignment and effective contribution to future priorities, it is crucial for the Strategy to consider the framework of post-2027 Cohesion Policy.



Horizontal coherence across all PAs is less visible than internal (vertical) coherence within each PA. However, recent years have shown some increased synergies, particularly in areas requiring multi-PA collaboration, such as flood risk management.

EUSDR embedding tools

As stated in the EUSDR Embedding Guidance Paper 2024²⁷, embedding helps to reveal synergies between programmes and MRS, better align MRS with relevant EU policies and funding mechanisms, particularly with regard to the EU integration process.

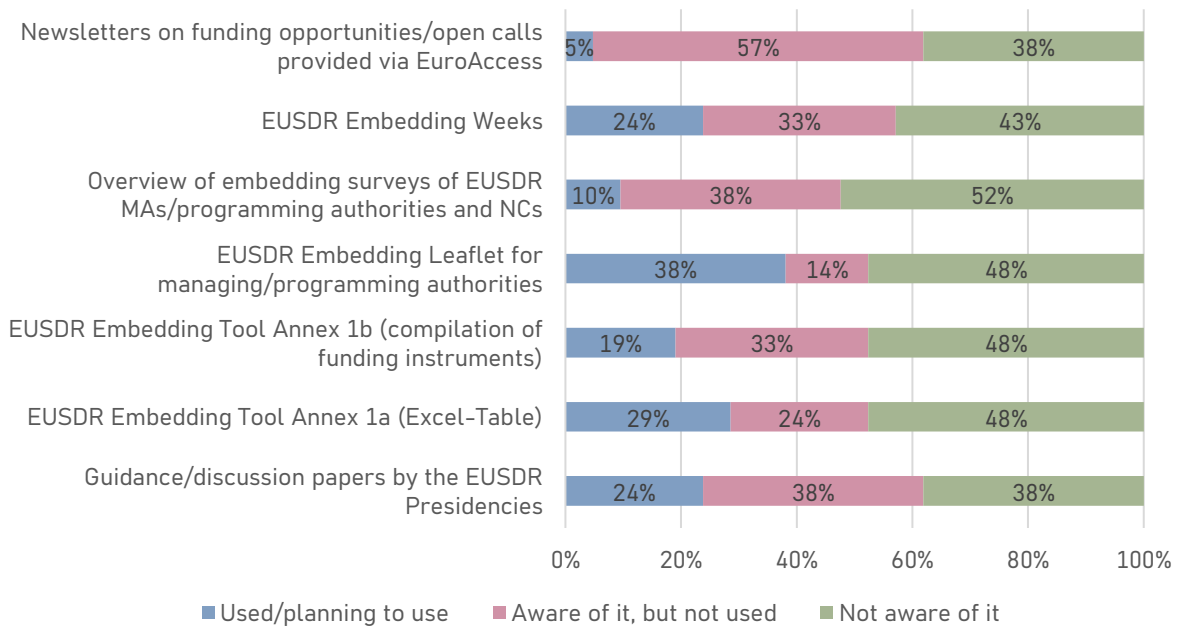
Embedding goes beyond 'purely financial' activities but also includes governance, coordination or communication measures. The EUSDR has developed various tools/guidelines in this regard, such as:

- EUSDR Embedding Tools (including Annexes)
- EUSDR Embedding Guidance Papers
- EuroAccess call distributions

The EUSDR managing/programming authorities' network (ESF, ERDF/CF, IPA/NDICI), the EUSDR Embedding Weeks and cross-MRS exchange in Interact WGs/events/tools are other mechanisms supporting the embedding process.

However, a significant portion of the 21 programmes responding to the survey are not aware of the various EUSDR embedding tools/activities developed for the period 2021-2027, or even when they are aware, they have not used them (see figure below).

Figure 14: Use of EUSDR embedding tools/activities by the programmes



Source: Survey to the managing authorities of ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, IPA/NPDI, Horizon, July-September 2024, n = 21

Absorption of funding sources in 2021-2027

The Interreg DRP is the main source of funding for the EUSDR activities. Other Interreg programmes and EU centrally managed programmes have also funded activities such as the CEF, Horizon Europe/Horizon 2020, COSME, LIFE, Erasmus+, EaSI, etc.

The DRP provides financial support to the PACs and DSP. The EUSDR stakeholders are well represented in the DRP Monitoring Committee. 10 EUSDR NCs are DRP Monitoring Committee members and full partners. EUSDR-related issues are discussed in the DRP Monitoring Committee, which can help decide on the support of the PAC, the DSP and on calls. MA/JS informs/consults the EUSDR TRIO PCY and/or the DSP on relevant strategic issues related to the EUSDR. In addition, the

²⁷ https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Guidance_Paper_EUSDR_embedding_process_08.2024_final.pdf

DRP will facilitate close cooperation between its projects and the EUSDR through the capitalisation strategy of the programme²⁸.

There is however **administrative burden** linked to funding, especially for the PACs (e.g., financial reporting), who received direct funding from the EC before. The figure below shows other **challenges** in the funding and embedding process, such as **unclear benefits for the programmes** or **the small territorial impact** their funding can have on the Danube Region.

Figure 15: Possible challenges in the embedding process



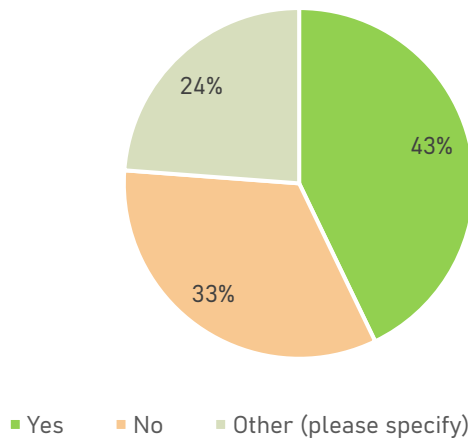
Source: Survey to the managing authorities of ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, IPA/NPDI, Horizon, July-September 2024, n = 21, Feedback from EUSDR core stakeholder consultation

Additionally, a few EUSDR external stakeholders note that MRS are not very good at formulating demands (concrete benefits/objectives, project proposals), especially to mainstream programmes.

EUSDR MA networks (ESF+, CF/ERDF, IPA III/NDICI)

Almost half of the programmes responding to the survey are part of an established network or structured dialogue with the EUSDR bodies. Some indicate that this dialogue is ad-hoc or needs based.

Figure 16: Has a network or structured dialogue been established with EUSDR bodies?



Source: Survey to the managing authorities of ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, IPA/NPDI, Horizon, July-September 2024, n = 21

²⁸ <https://interreg-danube.eu/storage/media/01HthyQ7APK6Y2P6FRBW7JWJ3C.pdf>

The programmes involved in these networks or dialogues identified the following **results/benefits**:

- **Enhanced cooperation:** Regular meetings between MAs at the PA level to facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences, exchanges with the DSP
- Identification of **potential synergies** and common opportunities
- **Increased visibility:** Participation at the EUSDR events (e.g., EUSDR Annual Forum) has raised the visibility of the EUSDR and programmes (e.g., own stand and presentations)
- **Improved information sharing:** Access to information on macro-regional strategies and programmes of macro-regional relevance through regular meetings between all CBC programmes facilitated by the national coordination platforms.

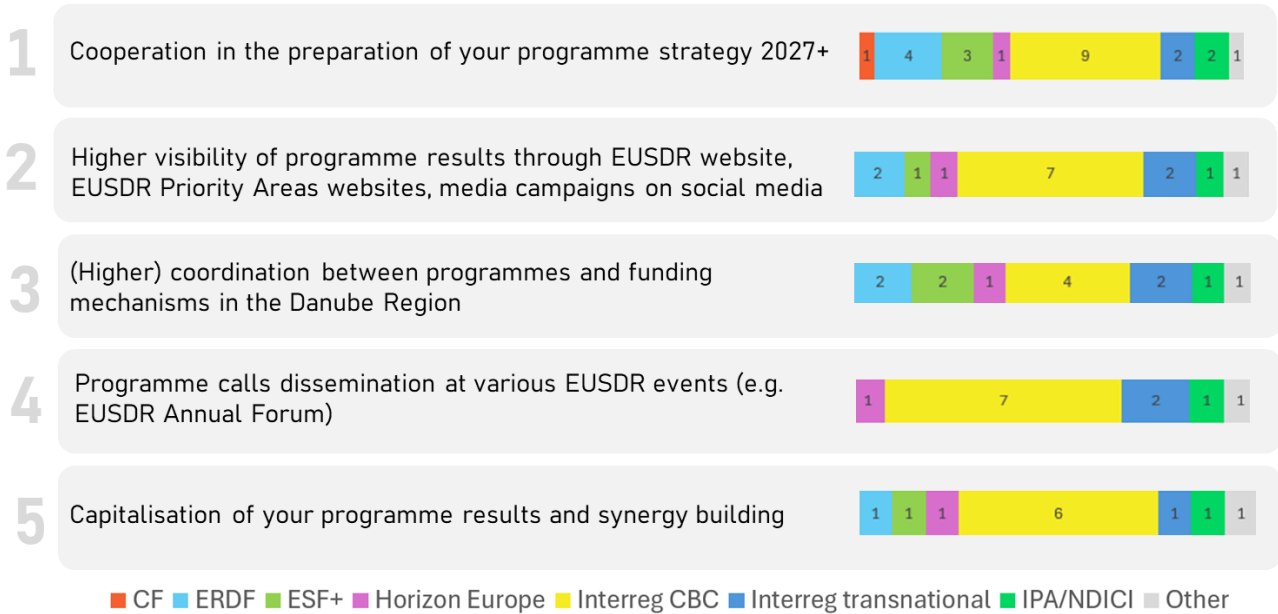
However, while some EUSDR MA networks, such as the ESF MA network, function effectively, participation in others remains inconsistent.

Future cooperation between the EUSDR and different programmes

For the 2021–2027 and post-27 programming periods, the programmes suggest some key activities where the cooperation with the EUSDR would be mainly relevant for them.

The figure below highlights the top five activities mentioned, though this list is not exhaustive, and additional programme activities can and should be considered for cooperation with the EUSDR.

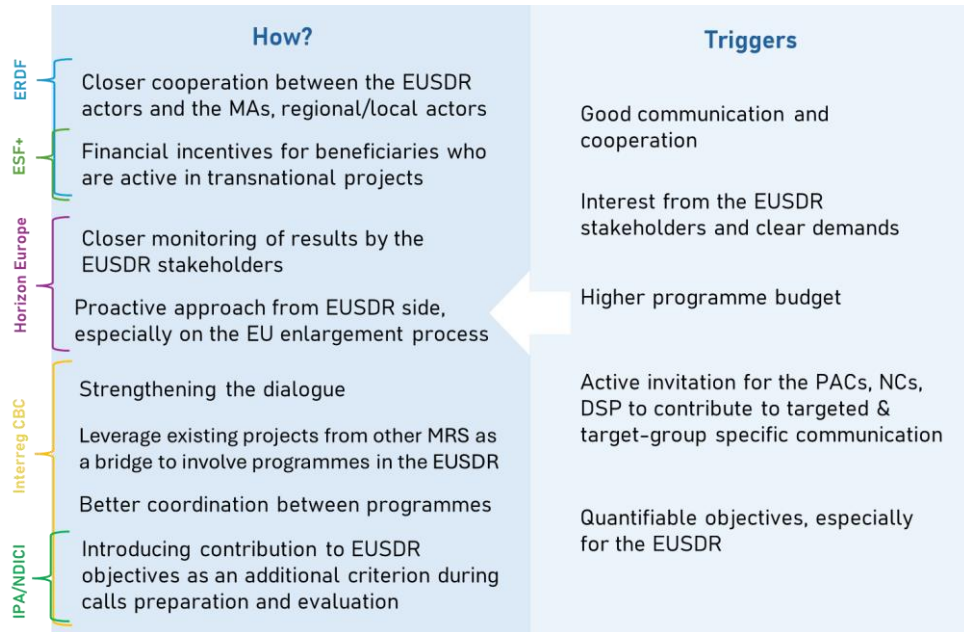
Figure 17: Top 5 programme activities for cooperation with the EUSDR in 2021–2027 and 2027+



Source: Survey to the managing authorities of ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, IPA/NPDI, Horizon, July–September 2024 (multiple selection possible, in total n = 75)

The figure below lists **approaches and triggers proposed by the programmes to enhance their contribution to the EUSDR**.

Figure 18: Approaches and triggers to enhance the programme contribution to the EUSDR

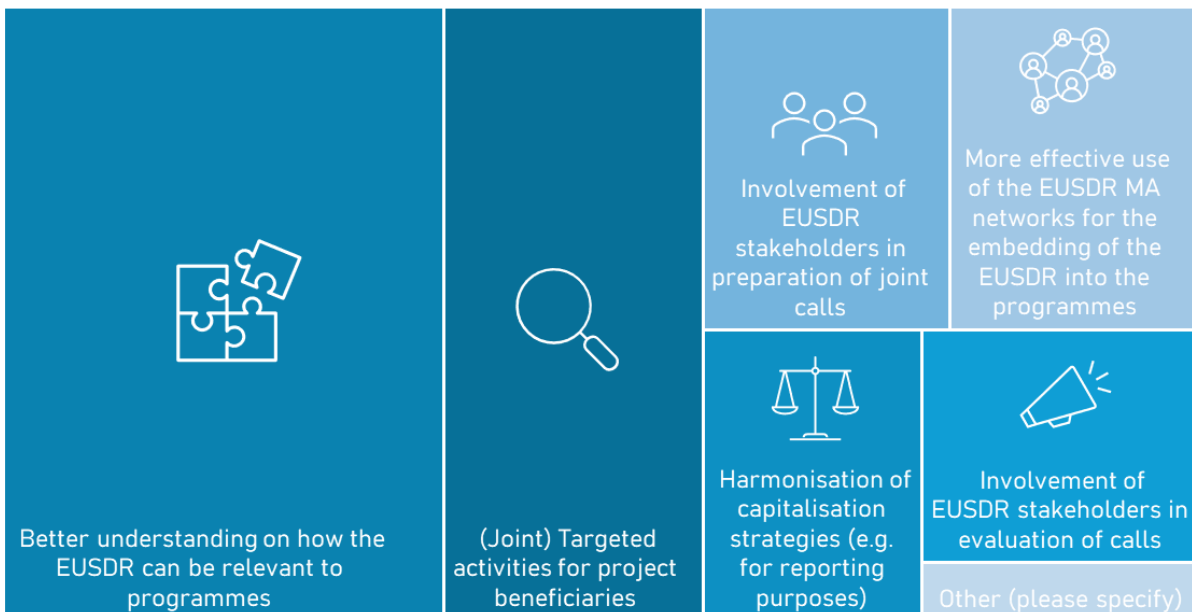


Source: Survey to the managing authorities of ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, IPA/NPDI, Horizon, July–September 2024, n = 21

The EUSDR core stakeholders mentioned other approaches like harmonising funding rules (e.g., as implemented between Horizon Europe and the CEF), more decision power on selecting projects, joint project calls, trainings and exchange of experience between EU MS and EU candidate countries on obtaining funding and implementing projects, including also on the IPA/NDICI/accession instruments, institutionalising the network of MAs. In addition to the EUSDR, strong commitment from the EC (also including DG ENEST) and national authorities is recommended. Better link with project promoters and implementers is also mentioned.

On the EUSDR’s support to facilitate their cooperation with the Strategy, the programmes mainly suggest activities to better understand the benefits for their work, joint activities for beneficiaries, preparing joint calls, better use of EUSDR MAs and harmonising the capitalisation strategies.

Figure 19: EUSDR support to enhance the cooperation with programmes



Source: Survey to the managing authorities of ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, IPA/NPDI, Horizon, July–September 2024, n = 21

Coherence of the EUSDR

The 2020 EC report on the implementation of MRS²⁹ notes that the **EUSDR Action Plan** aligns with the priorities and challenges of the Danube Region and the new EU priorities like the European Green Deal, SMEs, tourism and cultural heritage. A high alignment and contribution of the EUSDR to wider policy objectives is especially related to the EU Cohesion Policy, and EU Enlargement and EU Neighbourhood policies³⁰. However, as mentioned by the EUSDR core stakeholders during the interviews, the post-2027 Cohesion Policy (currently under discussion) must be taken into account to ensure the Strategy alignment and contribution to its priorities.

In terms of internal coherence, and especially cross-PA cooperation in the past five years, there have been some synergies, especially in topics that require such cooperation (e.g., flood risk management³¹). However, the EUSDR Impact Evaluation 2022 concludes that **there is less visible horizontal coherence across the PAs than internal (vertical) coherence within each PA**. The need for more knowledge sharing and learning between the PAs in the future (e.g., projects, activities) has been also outlined by some EUSDR core stakeholders.

2.5 Policy impact

Key findings on policy impact

According to the EUSDR core stakeholders, the EUSDR has made good progress in **fostering regional cooperation and implementing projects**.



Key strategic outcomes include: enhanced regional cooperation, being a platform for cooperation and networking, better access to funding, increased political attention to certain topics, supporting the EU enlargement, improved information and policy developments exchange, as well as other more tangible/thematic and territorial outcomes such as unified border-crossing procedures in navigation, a master plan for inland waterways, cross-border healthcare services, the Danube River Lab, the DARIF Joint Operation, a new TEN-T regulation (Western Balkans-Eastern Mediterranean), infrastructure projects e.g. the Komarom-Komarno Danube Bridge and 3 bridges across the Ipoly River (HU-SK), electrification of 55 km long Püspökladány – HU/RO border (towards Oradea) railway line, studies in various topics, establishment and cooperation between Digital Innovation Hubs in various states.



Main changes in the EUSDR governance that according to the EUSDR core stakeholders contributed to the outcomes in 2020-2024 are: the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, the DSP's support, written procedures, the embedding process and the long-term mindset of EUSDR (TRIO) PCY.



Some **concerns raised by some stakeholders** such as: the EUSDR losing its strategic focus and becoming more project-oriented or the perception of a few PACs as being excluded from funding discussion on national, regional and EU levels.

²⁹ European Commission (2020): Report on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies. COM(2020) 578 final, 23.9.2020

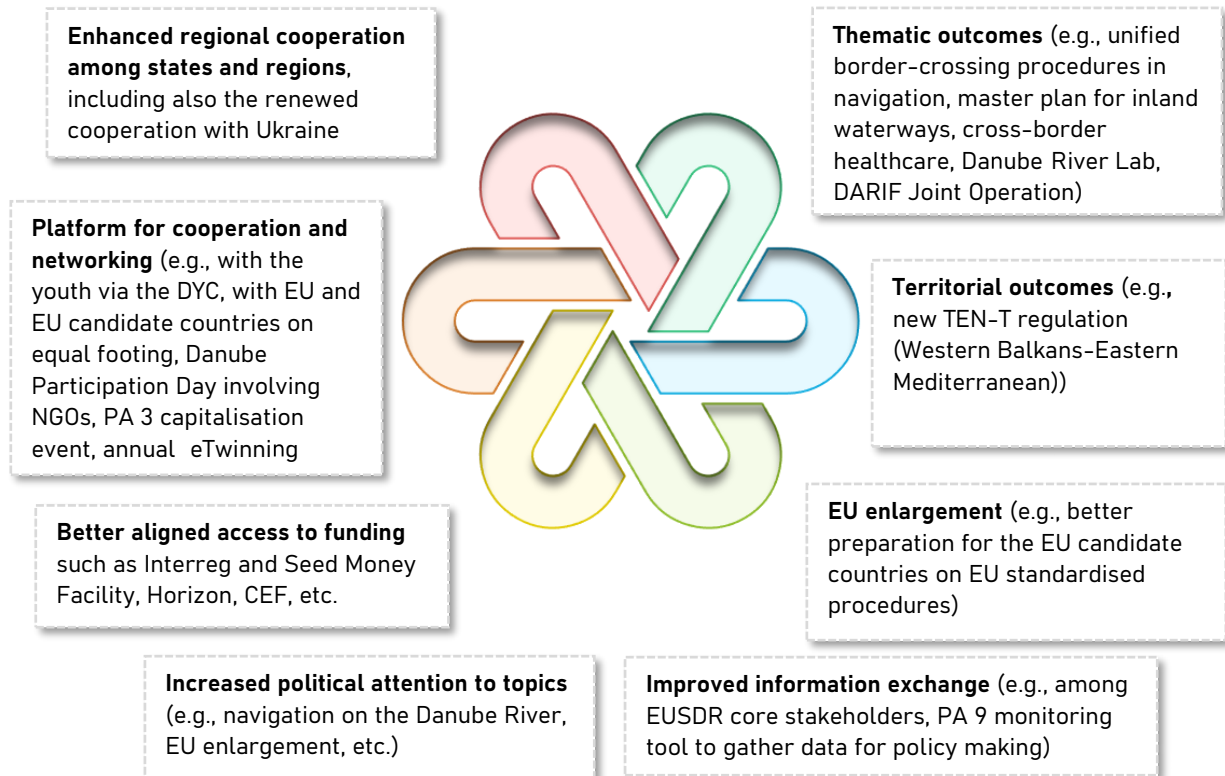
³⁰ Impact Evaluation 2022;

³¹ Interviews with the EUSDR core stakeholders 2024

Main outcomes generated by the EUSDR

The EUSDR has made good progress in fostering regional cooperation and implementing projects. The figure below presents some EUSDR strategic outcomes according to the EUSDR core stakeholders.

Figure 20: main strategic outcomes generated by the EUSDR



Source: Interviews, Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024

Key changes in the EUSDR governance that, according to the EUSDR core stakeholders, contributed positively to the outcomes in 2020-2024 are:

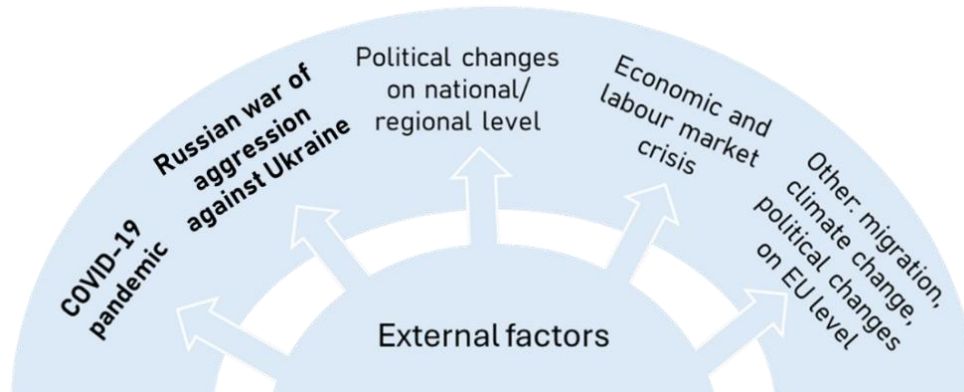
- EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, which serves as a basis for the implementation of the Strategy by clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the EUSDR core stakeholder
- DSP as a “strategic secretariat of the EUSDR” proving comprehensive support for EUSDR core stakeholders
- Written procedures, allowing swift adoption of decisions
- Embedding process, and
- Stronger EUSDR (TRIO) PCY focused on long-term priorities and contribution of the Strategy

However, there are also some **concerns raised by the stakeholders** such as: the EUSDR losing its strategic focus and becoming more project-oriented, or the perception of some PACs as being excluded from funding discussion on national, regional and EU levels or the power of NCs in the decision-making compared to the PACs.

2.6 External factors

There have been a few external factors influencing the EUSDR implementation between 2020 and 2024 (see below), with the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine being the main ones.

Figure 21: Main external factors influencing the EUSDR



Source: Interviews, Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July–September 2024

Some **negative impacts** resulting from the external factors are:

- Some factors (e.g., COVID-19, Russian war of aggression against Ukraine) changed priorities on EU and national level, which directly influenced the EUSDR's work since the PACs had already applied for funding of their PAC projects through the Interreg DRP in 2019. These factors also highlighted the need for flexibility and adaptability in light of current or future challenges, as well as future priorities of the post-2027 EU Cohesion Policy.
- The COVID-19 pandemic limited the number of in-person meetings in all PAs. This was especially a key challenge for PA 11 (Security) where bringing people in person together is essential considering its focus on security issues.
- The COVID-19 pandemic also impacted the engagement with the SGs and WGs/TFs. While online meetings increased interaction in some PAs, they also hindered active participation.

Some **positive changes triggered** by the external factors are:

- The COVID-19 pandemic triggered the use of written procedures, which made the decision-making process more transparent.
- As highlighted by some stakeholders, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (although, in itself, dreadful and appalling) significantly contributed to enhancing cooperation and helped to understand the importance of cooperation between the EUSDR stakeholders.

3 Conclusions

Chapter 3 presents the conclusions of the EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation, answering the six evaluation questions. Comparison with previous EUSDR evaluations is also made, where relevant.

1. To what extent is there sufficient **political commitment** for the implementation of the EUSDR?
2. To what extent is the overall **governance system** functional and supports a coherent Strategy development and an accompanying progress monitoring?
3. To what extent is the **technical implementation and policy coordination** in the Priority Areas (PAs) successful?
4. To what extent is it possible to **obtain funding** for the EUSDR implementation?
5. To what extent has the EUSDR implementation generated short or longer-term **outcomes**?
6. To what extent did the **external factors** influence the implementation of the EUSDR?

3.1 To what extent is there sufficient political commitment for the implementation of the EUSDR?

The EUSDR has seen increased political commitment since 2020. This seems to be however **mainly the case for the EU candidate countries**, which view the Strategy as a pathway to EU accession. The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine (although dreadful and appalling) also stressed the importance of macro-regional cooperation.

There is an inconsistent engagement from key decision-makers on national level and a prioritisation of other EU and national priorities over the EUSDR's priorities. This echoes the concerns raised in the previous EUSDR operational and impact evaluations, stressing the need to **gain and retain political attention**. This is relevant for all states, especially for the EU MS, where the initial enthusiasm for the EUSDR may have waned in some cases.

National political commitment is more challenging to strengthen if the NCs participating in EUSDR high-level meetings do not possess the decision-making capacity, or there is insufficient national institutional coordination to support decision-making.

More commitment from the European Commission is also needed. A **proactive role** from the Commission (DG REGIO with higher-level political representatives, line-DGs) as well as from other EU institutions would positively influence the political commitment on national level.

Some **EUSDR mechanisms** that have contributed to strengthening political commitment are: stronger EUSDR Presidencies, the EUSDR Annual Forum, regular Ministerial meetings and national coordination platforms (e.g. ÖROK in Austria, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Hungary, Czech Republic, among others).

The **cross-MRS cooperation has not been fully utilised** to enhance the MRS visibility and political commitment. At political level, mechanisms such as the High-Level Group (HLG) meetings or the TRIO Presidencies meetings of the four MRS can serve as platforms to not only discuss and share experiences among the MRS, but to also jointly develop and disseminate messages to politicians and **advocate for increased political commitment** of the MRS on EU level. This is especially important in the context of the post-2027 discussions to secure a **strong position** for the MRS in the next EU Cohesion Policy (e.g. providing consolidated input to the European Commission's consultation on the next Multiannual Financial Framework³²).

³² European Commission (2025). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The road to the next Multiannual Financial Framework COM (2025) 46 final, February 2025. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_486

At technical level, the Interact cross-MRS working groups/meetings can be seen as tools to support **skills development** of the MRS facility points (DSP in the case of EUSDR) and share experiences and good practices on specific topics (e.g. youth involvement)

The revised EUSDR Action Plan **remains relevant** to the needs and challenges in the Danube Region. In the next years, alignment with future EU policy developments should be ensured. The complexity and time required for the revision process of the EUSDR Action Plan, coupled with the long-term perspective the EUSDR has, make frequent revisions of the EUSDR Action Plan impractical.

Therefore, flexible approaches are needed for **regular check of the relevance of the Strategy** to current and future developments (e.g. territorial challenges and opportunities, priorities of the next Multiannual Financial Framework) and to ensure greater responsiveness.

3.2 To what extent is the overall governance system functional and supports a coherent Strategy development and an accompanying progress monitoring?

The EUSDR governance system has become **more solid and transparent since 2020**, primarily due to:

- **EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper**, which defines the roles and responsibilities of the EUSDR core stakeholders and facilitates the EUSDR PCY rotation process
- **Written procedures**, making the decision-making process more transparent and efficient
- **DSP** as a strategic working unit and supportive body for the EUSDR
- **Stronger EUSDR PCIEs** with **long-term mindset**
- **Capacity building for newcomers** and use of **INTRANET**

The EUSDR continues (as before 2020) to face challenges related to **resource constraints, staff turnover, and limited engagement from SG members in several PAs**.

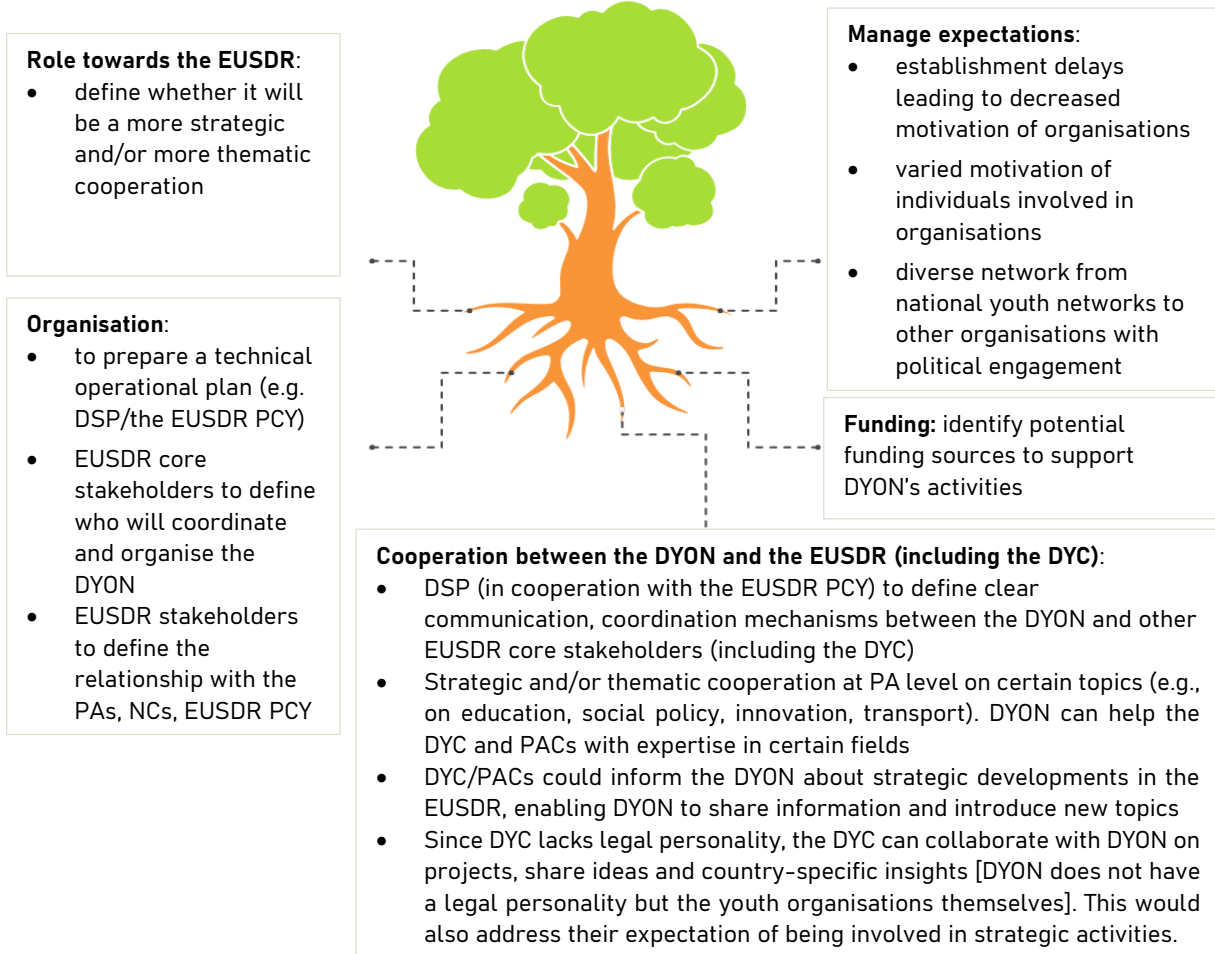
More support is especially needed to inform and increase the capacities of SG members and better coordination with the NC team and relevant ministries on national level. The national coordination platforms can be considered as good platforms that should be further utilised for strengthening national institutional coordination. Several amendments to the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper to better clarify the roles and responsibilities and the interlinkages between the stakeholders are also necessary.

There is some concern from the EUSDR core stakeholders on the PACs being focused more on operational activities (e.g., technical implementation of PAC projects) than on coordination. On the other hand, low engagement from the SG members (and staff changes) seems to compel PACs to dedicate more resources to operational tasks, thus limiting their capacity to engage in strategic coordination.

On the youth involvement, while the DYC is institutionalised, its role remains largely as an advisory body. Even when the DYC members provide input, there is no mechanism to track their uptake, decreasing their motivation. On the other hand, the DYC is a good instrument not only to promote youth involvement in the Strategy, but to also encourage their future engagement in the EUSDR. In this context, a clearer positioning of the DYC in the Strategy seems necessary, taking into consideration the resources, its limited tenure, advisory (non-decision-making) role and the limited expertise or experience in some topics.

On the **DYON** establishment, **several aspects remain unclear and require consideration** (see below).

Figure 22: Key considerations for the DYON establishment and cooperation with the **DYC**



Source: DYOC focus group, Interviews, Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July–September 2024

In terms of **monitoring and reporting** the EUSDR's activities and outcomes, improvements are made compared to the period before 2020, especially in the PAC reporting. However, the administrative burden linked to reporting (e.g., PAC reporting to the Interreg DRP and to the EUSDR), data gaps, limited resources and difficulties to obtain information from other stakeholders (e.g., from SGs for PAC reporting), as well as unclear purpose and use of the collected data remain as concerns.

In the context of post-2027 discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework, a potential shift toward a performance-based approach in Cohesion Policy would require the EUSDR to demonstrate tangible results and impact—particularly to secure funding from various instruments. Additionally, it would necessitate enhancing EUSDR stakeholder capacities to adapt to this approach.

3.3 To what extent is the technical implementation and policy coordination in the Priority Areas (PAs) successful?

The **involvement of and interaction between the EUSDR core stakeholders** have improved since 2020. However, on the national level some challenges remain.

In addition, **better alignment of national priorities with the EUSDR priorities is essential**. While there is successful integration of EUSDR priorities into national strategies and policies in specific fields, challenges persist due to national prioritisation, political dynamics and differing governmental structures and capacities in each state. Engagement on regional and local levels remains also limited, as financial support for local and regional projects is often the primary motivation.

Internal communication and information sharing require improvement and optimisation (streamlining), especially between the NCs, PACs, and the SG members. In some cases, stakeholders are being appointed without knowing about the Strategy, which make capacity building activities on EUSDR (PACs, NCs and DSP) level important.

As mentioned in the previous section, national inter-institutional coordination platforms are good examples for enhancing information exchange and improving national coordination across ministries. However, these platforms should be aligned with the administrative structures and arrangements in each state.

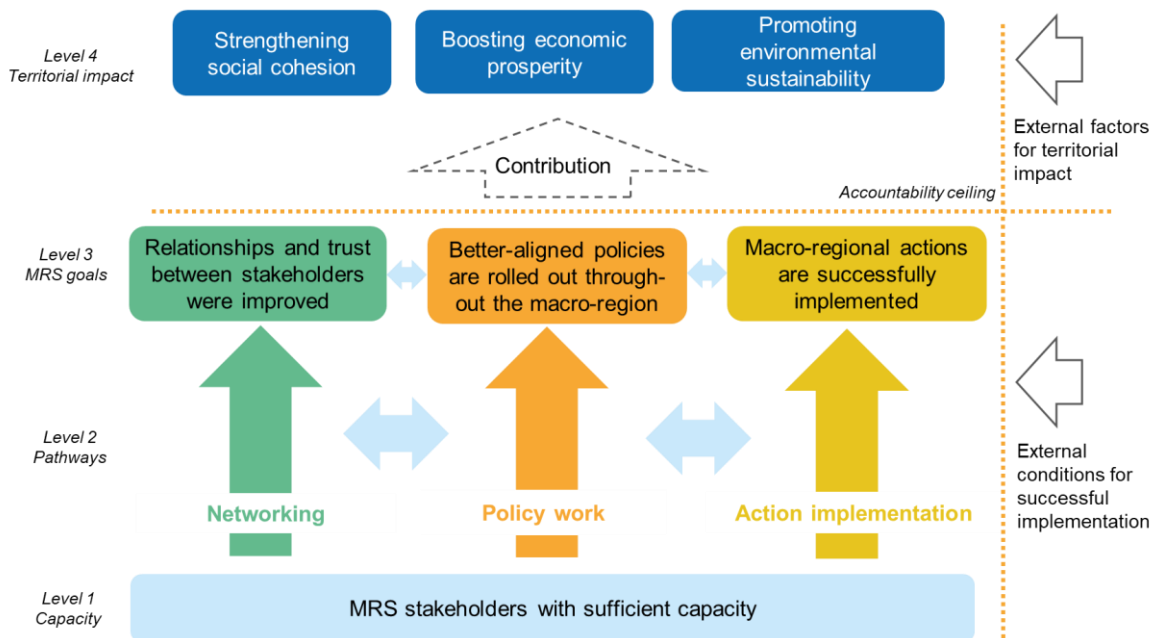
Some progress is seen in the **involvement and cooperation with external stakeholders** in the EUSDR (beyond the EUSDR’s family such as the civil society via Danube Participation Days, some EC line-DGs other than DG REGIO, mayors at the EUSDR Annual Forum, EU/international organisations such as Frontex, Europol, etc.). However, there is still low involvement from some EU institutions (e.g., some EC line-DGs, European Parliament), regional and local actors, politicians, the business sector etc.

Use of existing networking platforms, especially those provided by the European Commission, Interact and other institutions are important to expand the EUSDR stakeholders’ network. Active participation with a clear purpose and concrete demands are however necessary to ensure solid and effective involvement and cooperation with external stakeholders.

On the **technical implementation of the EUSDR**, the Strategy seems to give the idea of becoming more project-oriented, which may create confusion for the external and core stakeholders, especially those who are new to the EUSDR.

As outlined in the impact model of MRS developed by M&E Factory³³, action implementation (including project-oriented actions) constitutes only one of the three main pathways for the EUSDR implementation and its related impacts (see figure below). The other two pathways (networking and policy work) are “less tangible” but equally vital for achieving the EUSDR's strategic objectives and differentiating it from a typical programme that focuses on project-oriented actions.

Figure 23: Impact model of the MRS



Source: M&E Factory 2024

³³ Model for MRS evaluation developed by M&E Factory for Interact, Final report 2024

Some other specific concerns (mentioned by at least one EUSDR core stakeholder) are related to:

- Staff turnover
- Low involvement of SG members in several PAs
- PACs not being sufficiently involved in funding discussion on national, regional and EU levels
- Financial constraints and administrative burden linked to funding
- Difficulties in translating the EUSDR Action Plan and its objectives into projects/activities
- Lack of expertise in project implementation in some PAs
- Sharing updated information across the PAs on Danube Strategy Flagships.

Cross-PA cooperation has improved compared to 2020, which should be further continued, particularly in areas requiring collaboration between more than two PAs, such as addressing horizontal/cross-cutting topics like EU enlargement, supporting Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, etc. Strong internal communication and information/knowledge sharing are critical to facilitating such collaboration. Side meetings or workshops within the framework of EUSDR core governance meetings can also serve as a space for co-development of project ideas between the EUSDR core stakeholders, which could be then consulted with other projects promoters.

One persistent issue is **the EUSDR's visibility and communication of outcomes**, especially to political stakeholders on national level. **Success/impact stories** are useful tools to promote the impact of the EUSDR activities, especially in the context of relevant and pressing EU-related issues such as the EU enlargement and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine – from EUSDR operational implementation to network building and contributions to political challenges and opportunities on a macro-regional/(geo-)political solutions level.

Presence of high-level politicians and representatives at EUSDR events (e.g., from the European Commission, national/regional level) also enhances the visibility of the Strategy. Nevertheless, mere physical presence without concrete actions is insufficient.

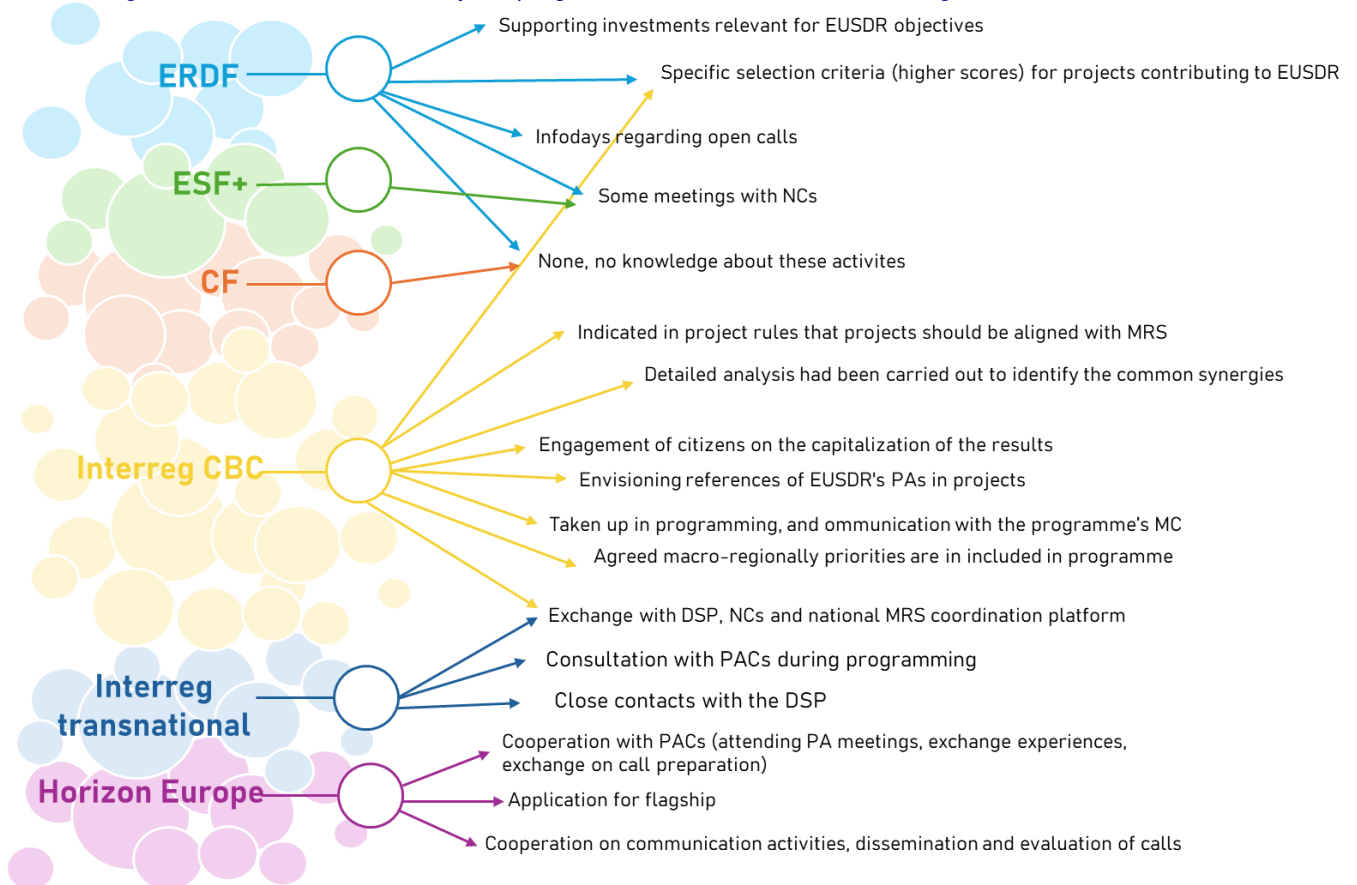
3.4 To what extent is it possible to obtain funding for the EUSDR implementation?

The EUSDR is one of the most advanced MRS in terms of embedding, especially in developing tools such as the EUSDR Embedding Tools and Guidance Papers. However, there is still work to be done in terms of building on the results of embedding, especially considering that many programmes are not aware of such tools or have never used them.

This can also be seen in the activities carried out by the programmes to facilitate the embedding of EUSDR in their programmes. As shown in the figure below, most of the activities reflect a passive role: aligning their programme strategies with the EUSDR's objectives (considering the EUSDR's broad thematic focus, this does not require substantial effort) without taking proactive steps to actively contribute to those objectives. Only a few programmes have taken more active steps such as funding Danube Strategy Flagship projects, consulting the EUSDR during the programming phase or assigning higher scores to project applications contributing to the EUSDR.

However, it is important to note that the figure does not capture all activities undertaken to embed the EUSDR within various programmes, as not all programmes implementing measures in the Danube Region responded to the survey.

Figure 24: Activities carried out by the programmes to facilitate the embedding of the EUSDR



Source: Survey to the managing authorities of ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, IPA/NPDI, Horizon, July–September 2024, n = 21

Note: The figure does not include the input from the DRP. DRP was addressed through an online interview and various activities were noted (e.g. DRP funding EUSDR projects, criteria for EUSDR, Info days, capitalisation exercises etc.)

The Interreg DRP remains a major funding source for the EUSDR, and its stakeholders are well-represented in its Monitoring Committee. Support is also received from other programmes (e.g. Interreg, mainstream programmes, Horizon Europe, CEF, COSME, LIFE etc.) However, obtaining funding is associated with **administrative burden** (especially in the EU Cohesion Policy), particularly for EUSDR **core stakeholders with less experience or capacity**.

There is also a **misalignment of expectations** between the EUSDR stakeholders and funding programmes. While the stakeholders seek greater embedding of the EUSDR in the programmes, programmes often lack understanding of their benefits and concrete demands from the EUSDR, especially for the mainstream programmes that normally do not address transnational cooperation.

The **MAs' networks or structured dialogues** with the EUSDR are a good platform to clarify the expectations, enhance cooperation, explore synergies, increase visibility and promote capitalisation. However, voluntary participation in such networks limits their impact. Moreover, a **clearer and more proactive role** is needed from the EUSDR core stakeholders: those involved in the coordination and facilitation (e.g., DSP, PACs) and those who could push or develop project proposals/initiatives/ideas.

For the 2021–2027 and especially for the post-27 period, **closer cooperation between the EUSDR and the programmes is essential**: from the development of programme strategies/documents, preparation of joint calls, joint activities for beneficiaries, monitoring of achievements by the EUSDR stakeholders and promotion and capitalisation of results.

The role of the European Commission is also critical, especially in ensuring a stronger position of the MRS in the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework. **Relevant cross-MRS mechanisms** (e.g. HLG meetings, MRS TRIO Presidencies meetings, Interact MRS working groups, DG REGIO events, networks of programmes) can be **leveraged to develop common requests**.

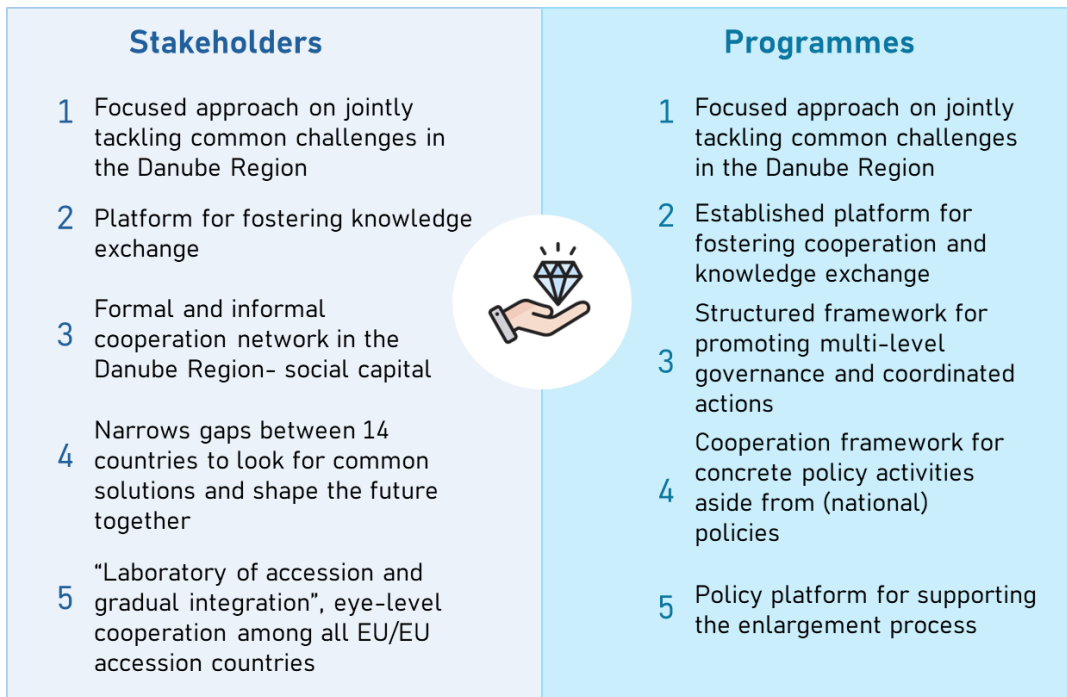
3.5 To what extent has the EUSDR implementation generated short or longer-term outcomes?

The EUSDR has generated soft and tangible outcomes. While the soft outcomes may not be tangible and visible, they serve as a good foundation or driver for achieving more tangible outcomes.

Some tangible outcomes achieved in 2020–2024 are: unified border-crossing procedures in navigation e.g. DAVID forms, master plan for inland waterways, cross-border healthcare, Danube River Lab, DARIF Joint Operations to improve safety and security for the Danube river, new TEN-T regulation (Western Balkans–Eastern Mediterranean), new railway line between cross-border, infrastructure projects e.g. the Komarom–Komarno Danube Bridge and 3 bridges across the Ipoly River (HU–SK), electrification of 55 km long Püspökladány – HU/RO border (towards Oradea) railway line, studies in various topics, establishment and cooperation between Digital Innovation Hubs in various states etc.³⁴.

The soft outcomes (linked to the impact model pathways “networking” and “policy work” in Figure 23 above) are key added value of the EUSDR to the Region, which would be lost without the Strategy (see figure below). However, such soft outcomes (e.g., *platforms for cooperation between EU and EU candidate countries on equal footing, networking, improved information exchange, exchanges on policy developments*) are also vulnerable to staff changes and irregular interaction between EUSDR core stakeholders.

Figure 25: Unique added value of the EUSDR



Source: Interviews, Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, Survey to the managing authorities of ERDF, CF, ESF+, Interreg, IPA/NPDI, Horizon, July–September 2024

The EUSDR’s short or longer-term impact hinges on consistent and broad cooperation across all levels of governance, requiring strong political commitment from the EC (e.g., DG REGIO, DG ENEST, etc.), and national institutions. **Actual integration of the EUSDR into EU policies**, such as EU Cohesion Policy and EU Enlargement, and **into national/regional policies and frameworks** is paramount. Without this comprehensive approach, the benefits of the EUSDR may be limited and benefiting only a narrow range of stakeholders.

³⁴ The list is not exhaustive and does not cover all outcomes achieved across the various PAs. Source: NC, PAC reporting, survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, other impact stories in the paper: [Slovenian-Presidency-of-the-EUSDR-2022_23_web-version.pdf](#) (page 30)

Furthermore, a **shared commitment between DG REGIO, DG ENEST and other line DGs is currently missing or is relatively low**. These DGs should collaborate more closely to identify synergies and opportunities for joint action. For example, cooperation between DG REGIO and DG ENEST would promote better understanding of benefits and commitment of the EU candidate country to the Strategy. Given the complexity of MRS and the specific challenges faced by the EU candidate countries, it is crucial to provide adequate support to ensure their effective participation.

For the long-term success of the EUSDR, **communication** remains a key tool to be used to address the political level (e.g., success/impact stories, one-page briefing for Ministers, etc.) and the programmes/project promoters (e.g., clear benefits, proposals). Effective communication of a shared vision for the Region to all stakeholders (national/regional/local authorities, academia, civil society, business sector, etc.) would foster the sense of ownership and commitment to the EUSDR, and can serve as a powerful tool to mobilise financial resources.

Some **triggers/players** enhancing the EUSDR contribution are listed below.

Figure 26: main triggers/players enhancing the EUSDR contribution



Source: Interviews, Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, July-September 2024, n = 51

3.6 To what extent did the external factors influence the implementation of the EUSDR?

The implementation of the EUSDR during the period 2020-2024 was significantly influenced by two major external factors: the **COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine**.

While the COVID-19 pandemic limited in-person interactions and meetings, it triggered/accelerated the use of online tools/meetings and written procedures, and it demonstrated the resilience of the EUSDR.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has led to a renewed EU and national focus on security. On the other hand, it has helped to understand the importance of cooperation, especially also with EU neighbouring and candidate countries, and of the EUSDR as a platform for cooperation and solidarity.

4 Recommendations

This chapter presents the recommendations of the evaluation team along the six key evaluations questions (and respective topics indicated in the ToR and EUSDR Evaluation Plan). They are structured as a roadmap outlining the what, why, who, where and when these recommendations should be implemented. A specific column is also added to indicate the prioritisation of recommendations as high, medium or low. Prioritisation was based on expert assessment, considering the most pressing needs and impact on the Strategy implementation.

Table 1: Recommendations

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
POLITICAL COMMITMENT	Higher EU political engagement	Roadmap defining: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New EU stakeholders to be involved (e.g., DG ENEST, etc.) EU stakeholders currently involved but needing improvement e.g., EC at technical level, REGIO high-level officials, European Parliament, Committee of the Regions Activities and period Benefits from both sides 	To increase political commitment on EU level	Medium	PACs and SGs (or PAs), NCs, DG REGIO, supported by DSP	EU/EUSDR levels	2025-2026
	Cross-MRS cooperation mechanisms not fully utilised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political level: Use the HLG meetings/four MRS TRIO PCY meetings as platforms to jointly develop and disseminate messages to the political level and advocate for increased political commitment of the MRS on EU level – especially in the post-2027 EU Cohesion Policy and the IPA framework³⁵ and the Growth Plan for Western Balkan (including the Western Balkan Investment facility) Share inputs from such meetings at the NC, PAC, NC/PAC meetings 	To increase the political commitment on EU and national/regional levels	Medium	NCs (EUSDR PCIES), DG REGIO, Supported by DSP	EU level/EUSDR level	2025-2026

³⁵ The final evaluation report refers to the IPA framework as it exists at the time of the report's completion.

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
POLITICAL COMMITMENT	Inconsistent or low national engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish (or use existing) national coordination platforms to better coordinate EUSDR actions across national institutions and support decision making • Better promote the benefits of macro-regional cooperation on national level: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ develop an impact model for the EUSDR to clearly show its benefits (for inspiration see the model proposed by M&E Factory at an Interact event in December 2024); ○ define clear messages/EUSDR unique selling position to be used as stand-alone documents for policy-makers. 	To ensure consistent national political engagement and commitment	High	EUSDR PCY NCs PACs & SGs (or: PAs) Supported by DSP	EUSDR level National/regional level	2025-2027
	No revision of the EUSDR Action Plan. There is yet a need for flexibility and adaptability in light of current and future challenges and the post-2027 EU Cohesion Policy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the PCY agenda as an instrument for a "reality check" on the EUSDR Action Plan, fostering a flexible and horizontal approach for enhanced responsiveness to current and future developments (e.g. territorial challenges and opportunities, priorities of the next Multiannual Financial Framework) and to ensure greater responsiveness. While the Action Plan should provide a stable framework, the PCY agenda and its related programme/internal settings should ensure the alignment and relevance of EUSDR activities to the evolving needs of the Danube Region and responding to external factors (e.g. to security concerns by utilising the PCY agenda to define concrete objectives and actions within PA 11: Security). 	To ensure the EUSDR and its EUSDR Action Plan remains relevant and responsive to current and future developments	Medium	NCs PACs & SGs (or: PAs) DG REGIO Supported by DSP	EUSDR level	2025-2026

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Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
	The EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper is complex and technical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simpler and easy-to-read description of the roles and responsibilities for the stakeholders • Include a governance structure which better shows the linkages between stakeholders and their roles 	To ensure the stakeholders understand their roles, responsibilities and those are actually feasible for them	Medium	EUSDR PCY, NCs PACs & SGs, (or: PAs) supported by DSP other EUSDR core stakeholders	EUSDR level	2025-2026
GOVERNANCE	Low engagement of the SG members in the EUSDR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the (new or existing) national coordination and PA platforms to better inform and engage the SGs (e.g. all SG members from all PAs in a certain country for a consistent and coordinated way) • Ensure dedicated budget and capacity within each PA to support ongoing SG participation and contribution to PA events and activities (e.g. for SG meetings, PAC reporting, etc.) • Provide capacity building to the SGs to understand their role in the EUSDR or trainings in relevant topics that would keep them motivated to be engaged in the EUSDR • Acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of SG members in various EUSDR success stories internally or externally at EUSDR events (e.g. having SGs present at the EUSDR Annual Forum on a specific topic/success story) 	To ensure the SG members are informed and have the capacities to be engaged in a more consistent and coordinated way	Medium to high	NCs PACs Supported by DSP	EUSDR/National level/PAC level	Starting from 2025
	PYC agendas and contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare annual briefings for the DGs (may be shared via DG REGIO) • Short preparatory meeting between the DYC and EUSDR PCY. DYON can support the DYC in drafting their proposals/recommendations related to the agenda items 	To further enhance the EUSDR's impact in the Danube Region, beyond EUSDR Presidency cycle	Medium	EUSDR PCY, PACs & SGs (or: PAs), supported by DSP and, NCs, EC	EUSDR level	2025-2026

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To use the PCY agenda as an instrument for a "reality check" on the EUSDR Action Plan, fostering a flexible and horizontal approach for enhanced responsiveness to emerging challenges. <p>While the EUSDR Action Plan should provide a stable framework, the PCY agenda and its related programme should ensure the alignment and relevance of EUSDR activities to the evolving needs of the Danube Region and responding to external factors.</p>					
GOVERNANCE	Clearer role of the DYC in the EUSDR and follow up of their contribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalise the procedures to track DYC's input/contribution and build institutional memory to benefit future generations of the DYC (seeing the work of their DYC predecessors; currently in preparation) Use the HLG meetings to exchange on youth involvement in other MRS and provide the results in NC, PAC and NC-PAC meetings Regular exchange between PACs and NCs on their collaboration with DYC/DYON members 	To have a clearer positioning of the DYC in the Strategy, and better track their contribution	Medium	EUSDR PCY PACs & SGs (or: PAs) NCs Supported by DSP	EUSDR level	2025-2026
	Operationalising the DYON	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Role towards the EUSDR: define whether it will be a more strategic and/or more thematic cooperation considering the diverse network from youth networks to thematic organisations, people with political engagement, etc. Organisation: prepare a clear operational plan, defining who will lead and organise the DYON, the relationship with the EUSDR PCY and other EUSDR core stakeholders (e.g. where, when and how to be involved, as an observer, advisor, implementer, etc.) Funding EuroAccess calls could be shared among the DYON, DYON to discuss internally the development of projects (e.g. in their own meetings) and PAs could 	To ensure a clear positioning of the DYON in the Strategy	Medium to high	EUSDR PCY PACs & SGs (or: PAs) NCs DYON DYC Supported by DSP	EUSDR/PAC/NC level	2025-2027

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
		<p>possibly be approached for joining/supporting the projects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity building: DYON to enhance its capacity-building skills in order to effectively engage in project management and implementation activities with the EUSDR core stakeholders. • Cooperation DYON-DYC: DSP as a coordinative supporting body between the two entities, meetings to explore possibilities for joint implementation of EUSDR activities, joint application for projects and funding or the DYC members being the final beneficiaries of DYON projects, e.g. for exchange study trips for young people in certain areas of university study/work that are relevant for the EUSDR (e.g. using small project fund facilities in various Interreg programmes, Erasmus+ calls, etc.) • Communication: regular updates on the EUSDR activities (1-2 pages newsletter per quarter) 					
	<p>Better monitoring and reporting of the progress without additional burden for the PACs and other stakeholders involved</p>	<p>Monitoring/reporting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure PAC reporting based on the EUSDR impact model (see Figure 23, Levels 1 and 2) along the following points: <u>Section 1: EUSDR preconditions</u>, covering the activities implemented, challenges, lessons learned/opportunities in the “cooperation with EUSDR core stakeholders”, “Steering Groups”, communication, etc. <u>Section 2: Networking</u>, covering the activities implemented, achievements/outcomes, challenges, 	<p>To ensure an efficient and effective monitoring and reporting system</p>	<p>Medium</p>	<p>EUSDR PCY PACs & SGs (or: PAs) NCs DSP Supported by Interact</p>	<p>EUSDR levels</p>	<p>2025-2027</p>

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
		<p>lessons learned/opportunities in the “involvement and cooperation with other stakeholders”</p> <p><u>Section 3: Policy work</u>, covering the activities implemented, achievements/outcomes, challenges, lessons learned/opportunities in the “policy development”</p> <p><u>Section 4: Action implementation</u>, covering the activities implemented, achievements, challenges, lessons learned/opportunities in terms of “projects/initiatives/...”, “capitalisation”, “funding”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use semi-quantitative questions to allow to facilitate easier data analysis and synthesis • PACs to organise online or in-person meetings with their SG members to collect information while preparing the reports • In the case of a performance-based Cohesion Policy/Multiannual Financial Framework, ensure harmonisation of monitoring and reporting between the Cohesion Policy and the PAC reporting: As post-2027 discussions on the next Multiannual Financial Framework progress, a potential shift toward a performance-based approach would require the EUSDR to demonstrate tangible results/impact—particularly to secure funding from various instruments. This would necessitate strengthening EUSDR stakeholder capacities to adapt to this approach as well as potential adjustments to PAC reporting. The proposed PAC reporting structure above, together with the impact model, would be relevant in this context. 					

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If a sectoral approach is adopted in the next Cohesion Policy, monitor whether the national reform plans incorporate macro-regional approaches. <p>Evaluation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an impact model for the EUSDR (see Figure 23 and the detailed impact model proposed by M&E Factory at an Interact event in December 2024) 					
TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION AND POLICY COORDINATION	Higher EUSDR core stakeholder involvement and cooperation on EU and national levels	<p>Operational (PA) level:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the Interact cross-MRS meetings and working groups to support further skills development of the DSP, especially on topics relevant for the technical implementation of the Strategy, and share relevant know-how from such meetings/working groups at the NC, PAC, NC/PAC meetings DYC: Regular updates on the EUSDR activities (1-2 pages newsletter per quarter); Short briefing meetings between the DYC members themselves before the EUSDR core governance meetings to identify topics and proposals they want to bring up <p>National level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the (new or existing) national coordination and PA platforms to better inform and engage the SGs (e.g. all SG members from all PAs in a certain country for a consistent and coordinated way), Provide capacity building to the SGs <p>EU/international level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve high-level/ decision-makers officials from DG REGIO, DG ENEST as well as other line DGs at EUSDR meetings and events 	Higher EUSDR core stakeholder involvement and cooperation on all levels; Better information sharing	Medium	EUSDR PCY, NCs, PACs & SGs (or: PAs), DG REGIO Supported by DSP	EUSDR levels	2025-ongoing

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
	Higher external stakeholder involvement and cooperation on EU and national levels	<p>Operational (PA) and national level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage higher-level EC officials from line DGs at the EUSDR Annual Forum, EUSDR PCIES thematic meetings, present or organise side events during DGs' events Invite local actors to discuss their involvement, share practices from other MRS, etc. at NC, PAC and PAC-NC meetings Further alignment of national priorities with the EUSDR's priorities, e.g. using the external coherence matrix and sharing it with the NCs <p>EU/international level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage higher-level EC officials from line DGs at the EUSDR Annual Forum, PCY thematic meetings Use or further improve direct communication between line DGs and PACs (e.g., DG MARE) EUSDR-DG REGIO-DG ENEST meetings, e.g. as part of the EUSDR Annual Forum or in Brussels facilitated by DG REGIO Encourage the participation of EUSDR core stakeholders at the events of various DGs (e.g., DG MARE, DG EMPL). As a good example, the EC has considered organising an online session "Speed Dating with the EC" in 2025, providing a platform to connect with representatives from various DGs. This type of initiative could serve as an opportunity for future exchanges between the EUSDR and line DGs. Establish direct contact between the PACs and DGs (e.g., DGs can be invited at PAC meetings) 	Higher external stakeholder involvement and cooperation on all levels	Medium	EUSDR PCY, NCs, PACs & SGs (or: PAs), DG REGIO, DG ENEST, Other line DGs Supported by DSP,	EUSDR/NC levels	2025-ongoing

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Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION AND POLICY COORDINATION	EUSDR risks becoming a program-centric initiative, losing its strategic focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop an impact model for the EUSDR to clearly define its strategic focus (for inspiration see the model proposed by M&E Factory at an Interact event in December 2024) Mission-orientation approaches: beyond individual projects towards long-term policy processes by connecting various projects to largescale actions Capacity building on translating the EUSDR Action Plan and its objectives into projects/activities Develop a proposal on the EUSDR's contribution to Ukraine's recovery and development with concrete measures 	Enhance the strategic focus on the EUSDR	Medium to high	EUSDR PCY, NCs, PACs & SGs (or: PAs) Supported by DSP	EUSDR/PAC level	2025-ongoing
	Cross-PA cooperation not fully explored	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dedicate a specific agenda item during the PAC meetings for cross-PAC learning and exchange (e.g., sessions on sharing best practices, identifying potential synergies) Create ad-hoc joint working groups with a specific mandate for thematic areas requiring involvement from multiple PAs. For ad-hoc working groups that are partially in place, ensure follow-up and sharing of lessons learned. <p>The EUSDR PCY (in consultation with the NCs and PACs) should play a key role in defining the specific mandate and topics for these working groups.</p> <p>Some relevant topic could be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> implications of the post-2027 Cohesion Policy/Multiannual Financial Framework on the Strategy and the potential adjustments needed. developing proposals for the EUSDR's contribution to Ukraine's recovery and development, among others. 	To enhance cross-PA cooperation; ensure internal coherence across the PAs, avoiding overlapping and exploring synergies	Medium	EUSDR PCY, supported by DSP, PACs & SGs (or: PAs)	EUSDR/PAC level	2025-ongoing

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
TECHNICAL IMPLEMENTATION AND POLICY COORDINATION	Increase the visibility and communication of the EUSDR	<p>NCs/PACs/DSP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further use of success/impact stories (e.g. at national days activities, or activities related to the EU etc.) • Infographics, podcasts to make information more accessible <p>DSP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target specific communication campaigns: e.g. 3 months targeting line DGs, 3 months the programmes, etc. • Cooperate with EU programmes to promote the EUSDR success stories at their events (e.g. share success stories with DG REGIO Communication Unit so the information is shared also among their channels – planned for 2025) • Use the HLG meetings to increase the visibility of the Strategy – DG REGIO to ensure the participation of all MS <p>PACs/DSP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation and presentation at EU Enlargement initiatives (e.g., as part of the Berlin process, Western Balkan Initiatives etc.) • Cooperate with academia to make the youth more aware of the EUSDR and its goal (e.g. university activities, support case studies on the topics, etc.) 	To increase the political commitment and ownership on national/regional levels	Medium to high	Supported by DSP, PACs & SGs (or: PAs), NCs and PCY	EUSDR levels	2025-2026

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
FUNDING	Limited access to funding and administrative burden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear roles on which stakeholders should be involved in the coordination and facilitation and those who should push, develop and lead project proposals/initiatives • Capacity building per type of stakeholder (also considering the EU accession instruments) • Guidelines on financial reporting across states/regions (e.g. rules applied by First Level Control Unit in different states/regions) • Use of Interact cross-MRS working groups/meetings to share experiences on access to funding between the MRS • Use of HLG meetings and four MRS TRIO working groups to develop proposals on how the MRS can have a stronger position in the post-2027 EU Cohesion Policy • Ensure programme authorities participate in the EUSDR MA networks, potentially by institutionalising their involvement through MRS MA networks (via DG REGIO, DG ENER, DG EMPL, etc.), or by introducing mandatory reporting and performance indicators within the Cohesion Policy that are linked to participation in these networks. 	To increase the political commitment and ownership on national/regional levels	Medium	supported by DSP, PACs & SGs (or: PAs), NCs and EUSDR PCY DG REGIO EUSDR MA networks, Interact	EUSDR levels	2025-2026

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
FUNDING	Misalignment of expectations between the EUSDR stakeholders and programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the EUSDR as a platform for capitalisation of programme results (e.g., promote the results, co-develop capitalisation calls with transnational or other programmes, co-selection of capitalisation projects) Support Interreg and mainstream programmes in addressing actions related to strengthening territorial cohesion Use of the EUSDR MA networks to clarify the expectations from both sides Leverage Interact's access to Interreg and mainstream programmes – joint dialogues PACs/PAC teams to formulate clear objectives, actions and project proposals that can be shared with the fundings programmes (e.g. via EUSDR MA networks, Interact events, etc.) following the good example of the shortlisted strategic topics. 	To increase the political commitment and ownership on national/regional levels	High	PACs & SGs (or: PAs), NCs and EUSDR PCY DG REGIO EUSDR MA networks, supported by DSP	EUSDR/NC levels	2025-2026
	Post 2027- EU Cohesion Policy/IPA framework ³⁶ need to truly embed the MRS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To ensure that Cohesion Policy and IPA instruments effectively support MRS, it is crucial to integrate MRS objectives into the new regulatory framework. This can be achieved by introducing mandatory requirements for programme authorities to consider MRS priorities during programme design, project selection, and implementation. By aligning funding decisions with MRS goals, the EU can maximise the impact of its investments and foster greater regional cooperation. Furthermore, the regulatory framework should encourage stronger collaboration between different funding instruments, promoting a more holistic approach to regional development. 	To ensure a stronger position of the MRS in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy	High	DG REGIO Other EU institutions, supported by DSP	EU level	2025-2027

³⁶ The final evaluation report refers to the IPA framework as it exists at the time of the report's completion.

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To assess the alignment of the EUSDR with the Growth Plan for Western Balkan (including the Western Balkan Investment facility) • Assess the potential positive or negative impact of future EU enlargements on the EUSDR (see the study on enlargement scenarios conducted by the European Parliament³⁷) 					
FUNDING	Synergies between the MRS not fully explored	<p>To maximise the impact of MRS and avoid duplication of efforts, it is essential to ensure alignment between the MRS which partly cover similar states (e.g., EUSDR with EUSAIR, EUSALP). By coordinating their actions and sharing best practices, they can achieve greater synergy and effectiveness.</p> <p>Regular dialogue and cooperation between different macro-regional initiatives (sea basin strategy, blue economy platform, etc) can help identify shared priorities, harmonise approaches, and optimise resource allocation.</p>	To better explore synergies and avoid overlapping between the MRS	Medium to high	Facility Points of the four MRSs, EUSDR PCY	EU level	2025-ongoing

³⁷ European Parliament (2025) Adapting the EU budget to make it fit for the purpose of future enlargements, Study requested by the Budgetary Support Unit PE 769.193 - January 2025
Available at: https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/BUDG_STU2025769193_EN.pdf

<p>POLICY IMPACT</p>	<p>EUSDR’s impact is difficult to be understood, especially for soft outcomes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop briefings for policy-makers and programmes that promote the EUSDR and explore synergies • In line with the EUSDR’s impact model (mentioned above), analyse the EUSDR’s contribution. • Focus on topics with the highest transnational relevance (e.g., biodiversity, climate change water, energy, security, transport etc.) and ensure alignment with the EU agenda such as European Green Deal, Digital Agenda, New Bauhaus Initiative, TEN-T, European Skills Agenda, etc., post-2027 instruments, and which key players/triggers should be reached • Develop a proposal for the EUSDR’s contribution to Ukraine’s recovery and development with concrete actions • Develop a proposal for the EUSDR’s contribution to the EU enlargement with concrete measures • Joint activities with DG REGIO and DG ENEST • Use the HLG meetings/four MRS TRIO PCY meetings as platforms to jointly develop and disseminate messages to the political level and advocate for increased political commitment of the MRS on EU level – especially in the post-2027 EU Cohesion Policy and the IPA regulatory framework, as well as the Growth Plan for Western Balkan (including the Western Balkan Investment facility) • Communication activities to promote the impact of the EUSDR (see recommendations under communication) • Utilise and promote the EUSDR within the post-2027 Cohesion Policy as a key instrument for capitalisation, particularly in scenarios where national sectoral reforms might outweigh territorial cohesion and cooperation³⁸. It should be emphasised the EUSDR's capacity to upscale national project results and downscale EU/macro-regional policies to maximize the impact of EU-funded investments in addressing transnational challenges (e.g., climate change, biodiversity loss, migration, security). 	<p>To better promote the EUSDR’s impact</p>	<p>Medium to high</p>	<p>NCs, PACs & SGs (or: PAs), EUSDR PCY supported by DSP,</p>	<p>EUSDR level</p>	<p>2025-2026</p>
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EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation, draft Final Report

Topic	Conclusions on issues to be addressed	Recommendation (what)	Aimed result (why)	Prioritisation (high-medium-low)	Responsible (who)	Level of implementation (where)	Timing (when)
EXTERNAL FACTORS	There is a need for flexibility and adaptability of the EUSDR Action Plan in light of external factors/events	<p>To establish mechanisms for a flexible and rapid response:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To use the PCY agenda as an instrument for a "reality check" on the EUSDR Action Plan, fostering a flexible and horizontal approach for enhanced responsiveness to emerging challenges. While the Action Plan should provide a stable framework, the PCY agenda and its related programme/internal settings should ensure the alignment and relevance of EUSDR activities to the evolving needs of the Danube Region and responding to external factors Create a crisis-response working group across the PAs to prepare a plan/protocol on how the Strategy can quickly respond to external events. 	To ensure the EUSDR and its EUSDR Action Plan remains relevant and responsive to current and future developments	Medium to high	EUSDR PCY NCs PACs & SGs (or: PAs) DG REGIO Supported by DSP	EUSDR level	2025-2026

Source: M&E Factory 2024

³⁸ Relevant studies/documents on the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and Cohesion Policy: European Commission (2025). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: The road to the next Multiannual Financial Framework COM (2025) 46 final – February 2025. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_486

European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). The future of EU cohesion: Scenarios and their impacts on regional inequalities – Cost of non-Europe, PE 762.854 – December 2024 [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU\(2024\)762854#:~:text=Cohesion%20policy%20plays%20a%20crucial%20role%20in%20promoting,identifies%20three%20main%20challenges%20in%20addressing%20regional%20inequalities](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2024)762854#:~:text=Cohesion%20policy%20plays%20a%20crucial%20role%20in%20promoting,identifies%20three%20main%20challenges%20in%20addressing%20regional%20inequalities).

European Commission (2024). Forging a sustainable future together: Cohesion for a competitive and inclusive Europe report of the High-level Group on the future of Cohesion Policy- February 2024 Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c6e97287-cee3-11ee-b9d9-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

5 Annex

5.1 Annex 1: Desk research sources

Table 2: Main documents

Documents / data	Source
EUSDR Action Plan 2020	EUSDR website
EUSDR Evaluation Plan for 2023–2028	EUSDR website
Evaluations (process eval. 2019 and impact eval. 2022)	EUSDR website, DSP
EUSDR PAC reporting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o for 2020–2021 o for 2022–2023 	DSP
NC reporting to the EC 2022(Austria, Bulgaria, Germany–Baden–Württemberg, Germany–Bavaria, Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, Slovenia, Ukraine), 2024	EC (via DSP where available)
EUSDR Implementation Reports (2016–2018, 2019, 2020–2021)	EUSDR website, DSP
Contact details (Mailing lists) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o EUSDR PACs o EUSDR NCs o EUSDR SG lists per PA o Other stakeholders/organisations on the EUSDR website ³⁹ 	EUSDR website, DSP
EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper (2020, updated 2023)	EUSDR website, DSP
Rules of Procedure of PACs (2023) and NCs (2020) + updated Version of 2023	EUSDR website ⁴⁰ , DSP
The ABC of Macro–Regional Strategies, 2022	EUSDR website, DSP
EUSDR Needs Assessments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> –2020: for closer cooperation between PACs/stakeholders –2022: on the engagement in Steering Groups –2024: on capacity building 	EUSDR website, DSP
Embedding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Guidance Paper for Embedding of the EUSDR into EU Programmes, 2020, 2022, 2023 o Paper on Monitoring of Embedding the EUSDR into EU Funds and Programmes 2021–2027, 2021 o Embedding State of Play 2016 o Other e.g. discussion paper, embedding week review o EUSDR Joint Statements (e.g. 2020) o Information on ESF Network⁴¹ 	EUSDR website, DSP
Communication: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Communication Strategy of EUSDR, 2020 o Communication Guide, 2020 o EUSDR Brand Book, 2023 o EUSDR Annual Communication Plans 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 o Social media platforms managed by DSP (Instagram – https://www.instagram.com/danube_strategy/, LinkedIn – https://www.linkedin.com/in/eusdr/, Facebook – https://www.facebook.com/DanubeRegionStrategy, X – https://twitter.com/EUSDR, YouTube – https://www.youtube.com/danuberegionstrategy) etc. o EUSDR main website (traffic & other indicators), and social media accounts that some PA manage: PA 3 (Eusdr Culture Tourism Facebook), PA 7 (Danube Knowledge Society (@danubeknowledgesociety) - Instagram-Fotos und -Videos, Danube Region Strategy: Knowledge Society Facebook, PA 9 (People and Skills in the Danube Region 	EUSDR website, DSP, or online

³⁹ <https://danube-region.eu/projects-and-funding/organisations-in-the-region/>

⁴⁰ <https://danube-region.eu/about/priority-areas/>

⁴¹ <https://capacitycooperation.danube-region.eu/partnerships-danube-strategy-institutional-capacity/esf-network-danube-region/> <https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/esf/>

Documents / data	Source
<p>Facebook) and PA 10 (PA10 "Institutional Capacity" of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region Facebook, https://twitter.com/pa10_eusdr)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ They are also channels for sharing information about EUSDR. ○ Printed and digital publications (newsletters, (e-) brochures) ○ EUSDR Annual Fora ○ Others: participation of EUSDR core-stakeholders in third parties events (events calendar section on the EUSDR website) 	
Stakeholder mapping	EUSDR website (Needs Assessment) DSP
Meeting minutes, reviews (SGs, (HLG, ⁴²), PA, EUSDR Presidency etc.)	EUSDR website (EUSDR intranet). PA websites (SG minutes), EC website
<p>DYC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Surveys (on DYC Pilot Action 2022-2023) ○ DYC RoP 2023 ○ Danube Youth Council Role ○ How does brain drain affect the Danube Region? - A Cumulative Essay of the EUSDR Danube Youth Council, 2023 ○ Proposal for the establishment of the EUSDR DYC & DYON, 2022 ○ Minutes of NC meetings, PAC meetings, NC-PAC meetings and SG meetings in which DYC participated and delivered inputs ○ Recording and report of the session organised by DYC at the EUSDR Annual Forum 2023 	EUSDR website, DSP
Ministerial Joint Statements (Bucharest 2019, Zagreb 2020, Bratislava 2021, online 2022 Košice, Brdo Pri Kranju 2023, etc.)	EUSDR website
Documents related to specific PAs e.g. studies, newsletter, presentations etc.	EUSD/PA websites
<p>EUSDR Presidency Programmes and Embedding papers by the EUSDR Presidencies including DSP Embedding tools</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Austrian EUSDR Presidency Programme: Shaping Transformation, Creating Opportunities: A Prosperous, Resilient and Secure Danube Region (2023 – 2024) ○ Slovenian EUSDR Presidency: Programme 2022/23, Brochure summarising achievements of the Presidency: Slovenian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (2022-2023) 	EUSDR Website
European Commission Documents:	
Implementation reports of EU MRS and Annexes (2016, 2019, 2020, 2022)	EC, EUSDR Website
Commission Staff working document (2022)	EUSDR Website
Other: EVALSED Source book, Presentation of the Strategy	EC, EUSDR Website
Council:	
Council Conclusions, 2019, 2020, 2023 (2011 as relevant)	EUSDR Website
European Parliament:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Renewed EU Strategy for the Danube Region, 2022 ○ other: The EU Strategy for the Danube Region, 2015 ○ Implementation of macro-regional strategies, 2020 	EP Website
Other relevant documents and studies:	
Flash Eurobarometer on Citizens' awareness and perception of EU Regional policy, 531/2023 and 497/2021	EC Website
Guidance Paper for identifying Danube Strategy Flagships 2022, Danube Strategy Flagships 2023	EUSDR Website
Vonhoff, Katja (2021): Interorganisationale Netzwerke der Donaauraumstrategie ⁴³	Other

⁴² <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&groupID=2455>

⁴³ [Publikation_Dissertation_final_Veroeffentlichung_Bib.pdf_\(uni-tuebingen.de\)](Publikation_Dissertation_final_Veroeffentlichung_Bib.pdf_(uni-tuebingen.de))

Documents / data	Source
VISION PAPER “Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region” and respective minutes of the meetings (e.g. in 2022, 2021, 2020 etc.)	EUSDR Website
Added value of MRS: Project and programme perspective, 2017	Interact
Bergström et al., A qualified non-paper by key stakeholders in the four macro-regional strategies, 2020	other
COWI A/S, M&E Factory, Study on macroregional strategies and their links with cohesion policy Final report, 2017	other
Braun, Gabor/ Kovacs, Zoltan Laszlo, Macro-Regional Strategies Experiment for the Renewal of Economic Policy of the European Union, 2011	other
Roggeri, Alain, Could Macro-regional Strategies be more Successful?, 2015	other
Spatial foresight brief 2019:12, macro-regional integrated territorial investments: how to break out of Interreg, 2019	other
Spatial foresight brief 2016:6, the GOA tool: assessment of macro regional governance systems 2016	other
COM, An alternative positive voice: The citizens’ Shadow Report project 2020-2022	other
Metis, Policy Recommendations for Streamlined Funding within the Priority Area 8 of the EU Strategy of the Danube Region (EUSDR)	other
EUSBSR after 2020: Governance remastered? May 2020	other
L&R Social Research and OeAD (2022). Ten Years of Investing in People and Skills in the Danube Region ⁴⁴	other
Interact. Making the Most of Macro-regional Strategies ⁴⁵	other
Future Perspectives for the Danube Region ⁴⁶	EUSDR Website
9th EU Strategy for the Danube Region Speakers Conference / 18-19 March 2024, Vienna ⁴⁷	EUSDR Website

Source: M&E Factory 2024 based on desk research

⁴⁴https://peopleandskills.danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/Ten-Years-of-Investing-in-People-and-Skills-in-the-Danube-Region_EUSDR-PA9-Publication.pdf

⁴⁵ <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/en/w/making-the-most-of-macro-regional-strategies>

⁴⁶ <https://danube-region.eu/future-perspectives-for-the-danube-region/>

⁴⁷ <https://danube-region.eu/joint-statement-adopted-by-the-9th-eu-strategy-for-the-danube-region-speakers-conference-vienna-18-19-march-2024/>

5.2 Annex 2: Field research

The selection of stakeholders for field research were based on the **main following criteria**:

- Involving the **EUSDR core stakeholders** as defined in the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper: NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members, EC DG REGIO, DSP, DYC. They were addressed either through interviews, surveys or a focus group.
- Involving **other (external) EUSDR stakeholders** not directly involved in the EUSDR processes, to provide an external perspective such as: European Commission (DG MARE, DG EMPL), ETC programmes (Interreg Danube Region Programme-DRP as key partner for the EUSDR implementation, Interact), MA/JS of the Interreg CBC, IPA/NDICI, mainstream, Horizon programmes, and experts from civil society and academia.
- Addressing **all states in the Danube Region** by at least one field research method.

Figure 27: Field research geographical coverage



Source: M&E Factory 2024

- Ensuring **all four EUSDR Pillars** are covered by field research methods.



Online interviews were conducted with the two DSP Pillar Officers. In each of the four Pillars, at least one PAC was interviewed: PAC 1a, PAC 1b, PAC 5, PAC 9 (addressing specific thematic topics) and PAC 10 (addressing more horizontal, cross-cutting topics). Considering that the Pillar “Connecting the Region” covers four Priority Areas, two online interviews were conducted (PAC 1a and PAC 1b).

The other PACs were addressed through an online survey.

Interviews

In the period May–August 2024, the evaluation team conducted a total of 23 interviews. An overall interview questionnaire was developed covering the 6 key evaluation questions, which was adapted for each interviewee.

Table 3: List of interviewees

Stakeholder	Interviewee
Core stakeholders of the EUSDR	
National Coordinators (NCs/NC team) (5 interviews)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. NC/NC team AT (current EUSDR Presidency) 2. NC/NC team ME 3. NC/NC team RO 4. NC/NC team SI (previous EUSDR Presidency) 5. NC/NC team UA
Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) (5 interviews)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. PAC/PAC team PA 1a 7. PAC/PAC team PA 1b 8. PAC/PAC team PA 5 9. PAC/PAC team PA 9 10. PAC/PAC team PA 10
European Commission (1 interview)	11. DG REGIO
Danube Strategic Point (DSP) (6 interviews)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Coordinator 13. Pillar Officer 1&4 14. Pillar Officer 2&3 15. Capacity Building Officer 16. Communication Officer 17. Project Officer (on DYC, i.a.)
Other/external stakeholders of the EUSDR	
European Commission (2 interviews)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 18. DG MARE 19. DG EMPL
ETC programmes (2 interviews)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 20. Interreg Danube Region Programme (DRP) 21. Interact
Civil society (1 interview)	22. Civil society organisation (participant at the DYON meeting on 26 April 2024)
Academia (1 interview)	23. Professor/expert in enlargement and MRS

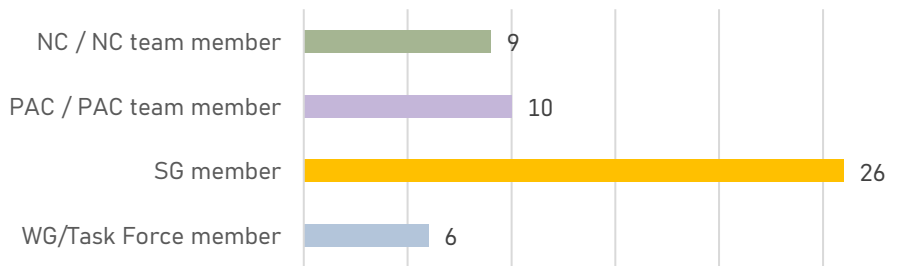
Source: M&E Factory 2024

Surveys

Survey to the EUSDR core stakeholders: NCs (not addressed through interviews), PACs (not addressed through interviews), SG members and WG/TF members. The survey focused on political commitment and ownership, governance, technical implementation and political coordination, funding, EUSDR added value and external factors.

In total **51 responses** were received, with the highest number of responses coming from the SG members. NCs and PACs were asked to submit consolidated responses, if possible.

Responses per type of EUSDR core stakeholder

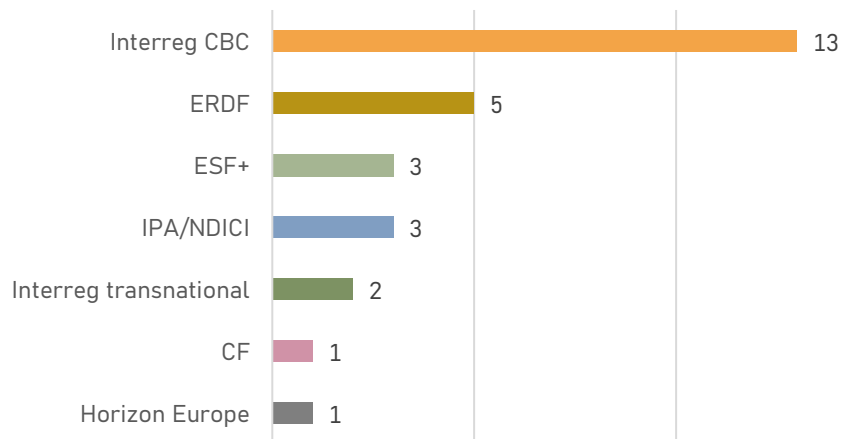


Source: Survey data, 2024

Survey to the Managing Authorities and Joint Secretariats (MA/JS) of the Interreg CBC/transnational, IPA/NDICI, mainstream (ERDF, CF, ESF+), Horizon programmes: The focus was on their awareness of the EUSDR, the relevance of the Strategy for their programmes, cooperation with the EUSDR as well as the added value of the EUSDR.

In total, **21 responses** were received, with the highest number of responses coming from the Interreg CBC programmes.

Responses per programme



Source: Survey data, 2024

**Note: Some respondents selected more than one programme*

Interview guideline

Intro

The purpose of the EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation is to assess the political dimension, governance and technical implementation of the EUSDR. The policy impact resulting from the revised EUSDR Action Plan 2020 and funding (EUSDR embedding process) will also be considered.

As part of the evaluation, the evaluation team is collecting information from various EUSDR actors.

This document outlines the **main interview questions** structured along the 6 key evaluation questions:

1. To what extent is there **sufficient political commitment** for the implementation of the EUSDR?
2. To what extent is the **overall governance system** functional and supports a coherent Strategy development and an accompanying progress monitoring?
3. To what extent is the **technical implementation and policy coordination** in the Priority Areas (PA) successful?
4. To what extent is it **possible to obtain funding** for the EUSDR implementation?
5. To what extent has the EUSDR implementation **generated short or longer-term outcomes**?
6. To what extent did the **external factors** influence the implementation of the EUSDR?

List of questions

Indicative questions (Note: The actual interview questions were adjusted to each stakeholder)
Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Name and role in the EUSDR</i> • <i>Experience with the EUSDR</i>
Sufficient political commitment <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In your view, did the political commitment and ownership on EU and national level improve or worsen in 2020-2024? Please provide examples. 2. Who are the enablers and barriers to political commitment? 3. What could be done to improve the political commitment and ownership at EU and national level?
EUSDR governance system <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. How are the defined roles and responsibilities being fulfilled in practice? Where do you see gaps (e.g. in clearly understanding your roles & capabilities, resources, good knowledge of EUSDR, level of influence, etc.) and/or good examples? 5. What works well in your workflows/processes at PA level? Is there any need for improvement? If yes, what? (e.g. more resources, administrative burden, information flow, transparency, etc) 6. Do you need any further support/guidance from the DSP? 7. Staff (FTE) dedicated to EUSDR in 2020-2024. Have there been staff turnovers in 2020-2024? 8. What influence do the agendas of the Presidencies have on the relations between key stakeholders in PA [...], workflows and processes, follow-ups? And on the policy outcomes? Please provide examples. 9. How can the involvement of the DYC at governance and thematic level be assessed in terms of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - participation, - opportunities given for meaningful content-wise contributions/input - use of their input by the core stakeholders? 10. In your view, is there any need for revision of the Plan? 11. What are the main challenges (if any) when measuring and reporting the progress at PA level (e.g. data gaps, usefulness for measuring progress, administrative burden)? Is there any need for improvement?
Technical implementation and policy coordination <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Which have been the main challenges in the implementation in PA [...]? 13. Has the interaction level between stakeholders changed in 2020-2024: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>at operational level</i> between DSP and EC, NCs, PACs, EUSDR (TRIO) Presidency, SG and WG - <i>at national level</i> between NC and EC, SG, EUSDR TRIO Presidency,

Indicative questions (Note: The actual interview questions were adjusted to each stakeholder)	
14.	Is there any need for improvement in the communication tools/activities addressing the target groups defined in the EUSDR Communication Strategy?
Funding	
15.	Which are the main challenges to obtaining funding and how could they be addressed?
16.	What other approaches could be used to foster cooperation among different programmes (national/regional, EU and non-EU actors) to monitor the outcomes of EUSDR alignment and funding mechanisms?
Short or longer-term outcomes	
17.	How could the EUSDR improve the information flow on implemented (strategic) projects and processes in the 12 PAs: - via the PAs and SGs, to enlarge the awareness of the EUSDR? - via the PAs, on the relevant (strategic) projects/processes implemented in the Danube Region?
18.	Which changes in EUSDR structures (e.g. for action and decision-making) and processes in 2020-2024 have played a key role in the policy achievements? Is there any need for improvement? What?
19.	In your view, which have been the initiatives/projects of most strategic value at PA level in 2020-2024?
20.	Which are/could be the main players, triggers in carrying out initiatives/projects of strategic value at PA level?
21.	What are the territorial differences of the PA achievements (e.g. urban/rural, EU and EU candidate countries)?
22.	Which are the main challenges to tackling cross-cutting issues /cross-thematic topics at PA level and how can they be addressed?
23.	What concrete actions could be implemented to generate more strategic outputs/long-term impact?
Any other comment (e.g. what would happen without the Strategy?)	

24. Which external factors have affected the EUSDR implementation in 2020-2024?

Please indicate the relevant factors and assess their impact on a scale of 0-3 (0=no impact, 1=low, 2=moderate, 3=high, NA=I don't know)

External factors 2020-2024	Main aspects affected by the external factors					
	Political commitment at EU level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	Political commitment at national level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	EUSDR governance	Technical implementation and coordination	Obtaining funding for the EUSDR activities	Policy achievements
Political changes at EU level						
Political changes at national level						
Anti-democratic and nationalist tendencies on national/regional level						
Climate change						

External factors 2020-2024	Main aspects affected by the external factors					
	Political commitment at EU level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	Political commitment at national level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	EUSDR governance	Technical implementation and coordination	Obtaining funding for the EUSDR activities	Policy achievements
Russia's illicit war of aggression against Ukraine						
COVID-19						
Economic and labour market crises						
Demographic change & ageing						
Migration (within or from outside the Danube Region)						
Other (specify)						

25. Which have been the main **barriers** which negatively affected the Strategy in 2020-2024?

Please indicate the **relevant factors and assess** their impact on a scale of 0-3 (0=no impact, 1=low, 2=moderate, 3=high, NA=I don't know)

Main barriers 2020-2024	Main aspects negatively affected by the barriers					
	Political commitment at EU level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	Political commitment at national level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	EUSDR governance	Technical implementation and coordination	Obtaining funding for the EUSDR activities	Policy achievements
Staff changes in the EUSDR core stakeholders						
Limited institutional and administrative capacities in the EUSDR core stakeholders						
Limited expertise of EUSDR core stakeholders (please specify)						
Lack of financial resources to fund EUSDR activities						
Gaps in the institutional coordination at EUSDR level						

Main barriers 2020-2024	Main aspects negatively affected by the barriers					
	Political commitment at EU level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	Political commitment at national level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	EUSDR governance	Technical implementation and coordination	Obtaining funding for the EUSDR activities	Policy achievements
Gaps in the institutional coordination at state level (e.g. between national institutions, etc.)						
Lack of common reference frameworks or harmonised legislations						
Differences in national governmental systems in the Danube Region						
Other (specify)						

26. Which have been the main **drivers** which positively affected the Strategy in 2020-2024?

Please indicate the **relevant factors and assess** their impact on a scale of 0-3 (0=no impact, 1=low, 2=moderate, 3=high, NA=I don't know)

Main drivers 2020-2024	Main aspects positively affected by the drivers					
	Political commitment at EU level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	Political commitment at national level encouraging the EUSDR implementation	EUSDR governance	Technical implementation and coordination	Obtaining funding for the EUSDR activities	Policy achievements
Existence of leader (state or organisations)						
EU policies/strategies in various thematic areas (specify)						
EU enlargement process						
Challenges in the Region requiring joint actions						
New EU funding sources						
Digitalisation						
Other (specify)						

Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members

Survey to EUSDR NCs, PACs, SG members, WG/TF members

Fields marked with * are mandatory.



Dear participants,

The company [M&E Factory](#) has been awarded by the Danube Strategy Point to conduct the Process /Implementation Evaluation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region ([EUSDR](#)). The evaluation aims to assess the strategic dimension, governance and technical implementation of the EUSDR. As part of the evaluation, the contractor is collecting data from different stakeholders that are contributing to or impacted by the EUSDR.

The contractor has selected you and your team to participate in this survey. **Your contribution will be of great value** for the future strategic activities and implementation of the EUSDR.

Thank you for submitting your answers by **31 August 2024!**

About You

* Which **EUSDR core stakeholder** are you representing? (multiple selection possible)

- PAC / PAC team member
- NC / NC team member
- SG member
- WG/Task Force member

* Please specify the **Priority Area (PA)** you are involved.

1

• Please specify the **country** you are located.

Section A: Introduction

1. In your view, to what extent have the following aspects been **challenging** for the EUSDR implementation in 2020-2024?

	Not at all	Low	Moderate	High	I don't know
• Political commitment and ownership on EU level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Political commitment and ownership on national /regional levels	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• EUSDR governance: roles and responsibilities, workflows and processes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Technical implementation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Policy coordination	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Funding: embedding, funding of projects/processes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• EUSDR outcomes: generating more strategic outcomes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Capitalisation of EUSDR achievements	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section B: Political commitment and ownership

2. In your view, how did the **political commitment and ownership** change (e.g. after 2020)?

	Declined	Did not change	Improved	I don't know
• EU	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• At national/regional level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

3. What can be done to **further improve the political commitment and ownership** on EU level?

1 character(s) minimum

4. What can be done to **further improve the political commitment and ownership** on national/regional level?

1 character(s) minimum

Section C: EUSDR governance

- 5. Which have been the **three main challenges** in fulfilling your roles and responsibilities? (multiple selection possible)

between 1 and 3 choices

- Not clearly understanding my roles and responsibilities
- Limited staff expertise
- Staff fluctuations
- Limited financial resources
- Limited time and staff resources
- Low political commitment on national/regional levels
- Lack in documents or information relevant for my work in the EUSDR
- Insufficient access to documents and information
- Insufficient content-wise introduction to my work in the EUSDR
- Other (please specify)

- 6. What are the **main challenges** (if any) when measuring and reporting your progress? (multiple selection possible)

- Lack of understanding its usefulness for my work
- Administrative burden
- Data gaps
- Limited resources
- Other (please specify)
- No challenges

- 6a. Other (please specify)

- 7. Which has been the **contribution of the Danube Youth Council (DYC)** to your work? (multiple selection possible)

- Facilitating the implementation of some activities
- Direct implementation of youth activities
- Providing feedback to our main activities and outcomes
- Supporting in data collection
- No involvement of the DYC
- Other (please specify)

- 7a. Other (please specify)

* 8. What could be the potential **added value of the Danube Youth Organization Network (DYON)** to your work? (multiple selection possible)

- Better outreach to youth organizations
- Better access to funding
- Experts feedback on our main activities and outcomes
- Higher involvement of the civil society
- No clear added value
- Other (please specify)

* 8a. Other (please specify)

Section D: Technical implementation and policy coordination

* 9. In your view, which have been the main **barriers** to the EUSDR implementation? (multiple selection possible)

- Staff fluctuations in the EUSDR core stakeholders
- Limited institutional and administrative capacities for the EUSDR core stakeholders
- Limited expertise of EUSDR core stakeholders
- Lack of financial resources to fund EUSDR activities
- Challenges in the institutional coordination on EUSDR level
- Challenges in the institutional coordination on national/regional level (e.g. between national institutions)
- Lack of common political reference frameworks or harmonised legislations
- Differences in national political/governmental systems
- Other (please specify)

9a. Other (please specify)

* 10. In your view, which have been the main **drivers** supporting the EUSDR implementation? (multiple selection possible)

- Existence of leaders (e.g., states or organisations)
- EU policies/strategies in various thematic areas
- EU enlargement process
- Common challenges in the Danube Region requiring joint actions
- Embedding
- New EU funding sources
- Digitalisation
- Other (please specify)

* 10a. Other (please specify)

Section E: Funding

- 11. Which are the **main challenges to obtaining funding** for EUSDR activities? (multiple selection possible)

- Lack of participation of the funding programmes in the EUSDR Managing Authority (MA) networks
- Lack of an information flow on implemented (strategic) projects and processes
- Low level of embedding the EUSDR objectives into the funding programmes (Interreg, IPA, mainstream, direct management)
- EUSDR wise – lack of experience in institutional project implementation
- EUSDR wise – lack of human/time resources
- EUSDR wise – lack of area of (ministry) responsibility/competence
- EUSDR wise – insufficient coverage via the EUSDR reporting tool
- Other (please specify)

11a. Other (please specify)

12. How can **they be addressed**?

1 character(s) minimum

Section F: Added value of the EUSDR

- 13. In your view, what has/have been the **most valuable strategic outcome(s)** at EUSDR, PA and/or NC level (e.g. since 2020)?

1 character(s) minimum

14. To maximize the EUSDR's contribution to the Danube Region, what internal or external **changes** /improvements are needed?

	Answer
Internally (within the EUSDR governance structure)	
Externally (beyond the EUSDR governance structure)	

* 16. In your view, **what is the unique value of the EUSDR** that would be lost without the Strategy? (multiple selection possible)

- Focused approach on jointly tackling common challenges in the Danube Region
- Structured framework for promoting multi-level governance and coordinated actions across the participating countries within large geographical area
- Established platform for fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange between participating countries (social capital) within large geographical area
- Better access to financing for relevant projects/processes/initiatives
- Formal and informal cooperation network in the Danube Region
- Other (please specify)

* 16a. Other (please specify)

1 character(s) minimum

Section G: External factors

17. To what extent did the following **external factors** influence the EUSDR implementation in 2020-2024?

	Not at all	Low	Moderate	High	I don't know
* Political changes on EU level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Political changes on national/regional level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Anti-democratic and nationalist tendencies on national /regional level	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Climate change	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Russia's illicit war of aggression against Ukraine	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* COVID-19 pandemic	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Economic and labour market crises	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Demographic change and ageing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
* Migration (within or from outside the Danube Region)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17a. Other (please specify)

1 character(s) minimum

End of the survey

Any further comments or recommendations:

* Please enter your **official e-mail address** here for eventual enquiries.

Thank you for your contribution to this survey!

If you need further information about the EUSDR Process/Implementation Evaluation, please contact the Danube Strategy Point (office@eusdr-dsp.eu) and the Evaluation Officer of the Danube Strategy Point, Mr Raphael SACHS (raphael.sachs@eusdr-dsp.eu).

Survey to the MA/JS of the Interreg CBC/transnational, IPA/NDICI, mainstream (ERDF, CF, ESF+), Horizon programmes

Survey to the MA/JS of the Interreg CBC /transnational, IPA/NDICI, mainstream (ERDF, CF, ESF+), Horizon programmes

Fields marked with * are mandatory.



Dear participants,

The company [M&E Factory](#) has been awarded by the Danube Strategy Point to conduct the **Process /Implementation Evaluation** of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region ([EUSDR](#)). The evaluation aims to assess the strategic dimension, governance and technical implementation of the EUSDR.

As part of the evaluation, the contractor is collecting data from different stakeholders that are contributing to or impacted by the EUSDR.

The contractor has selected you and your team to participate in this survey. **Your contribution will be of great value** for the future strategic activities and implementation of the EUSDR.

Thank you for submitting your answers by **31 August 2024!**

About You

* Which **programme(s)** are you representing? (multiple selection possible)

- Interreg CBC
- Interreg transnational
- IPA/NDICI
- ERDF
- CF
- ESF+
- Horizon Europe

Other (please specify)

Other (please specify)

• Please specify the **name of your programme(s)** and of the **areas covered**.

• Please specify the **funding source(s)** of your programme (s).

• Please specify the **organisation** you are representing.

Section A: Awareness of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

• 1. Are you **aware** of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)?

- Yes
- Yes, but I have limited knowledge
- No

• 1a. If no, **would you be interested** in learning more about the EUSDR and how it could potentially benefit your organisation/programme?

- Yes
- No

Section B: Relevance of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region for your organisation/programme

2. To what extent is the EUSDR **relevant** to your work or programme? (0=not at all, 1=low, 2=moderate, 3=high)

3. Please elaborate on **how** the EUSDR is relevant to your work and programme.

4. Please rate the following statements

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	I don't know
• Political commitment: The EU-political level shows strong political commitment to the EUSDR.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Political commitment: National/subnational governments in my programme area show strong political commitment and are actively translating the EUSDR into concrete actions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Governance and coordination: The EUSDR offers a platform and events to reach out to project beneficiaries.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Governance and coordination: The EUSDR defines actions, stakeholder networks and activities that can be used for project submission.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Governance and coordination: The EUSDR offers networks to exchange among programmes and EUSDR stakeholders.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Funding: The EUSDR offers concrete opportunities for my programme to be involved in the Strategy via embedding or other activities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Funding: My programme has established a collaborative relationship with the EUSDR, actively engaging in various stages of the programme life cycle, such as programming, implementation and evaluation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Outcomes: The EUSDR has led to positive impacts in my programme area (e.g. improved policy development/uptake, targeted projects, networking, access to ministerial stakeholders)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Outcomes: The actual EUSDR achievements are clearly communicated in my programme area.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Outcomes: There are concrete results or positive impacts from the EUSDR in my programme area.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• Outcomes: The EUSDR offers opportunities to showcase my project results and offers room for capitalisation.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section C: Cooperation with the EUSDR in the period 2020-2024

- 5. Have you **participated** in any EUSDR activities in 2020-2024?

- Yes
 No

- 6. If yes, in **which EUSDR activities** have you participated? (multiple selection possible)

- Participation in the EUSDR Managing Authority (MA) networks
 Participation in MA programme surveys
 Participation in EUSDR Embedding Weeks
 Participation at the EUSDR Annual Forum
 Joint planning of calls
 Joint evaluation of calls
 Joint communication activities
 Other (please specify)

- 6a. Other (please specify)

1 character(s) minimum

- 7. How did your organisation/programme **benefit** from these activities? (multiple selection possible)

- Preparation of programme
 Synergies from joint implementation of activities
 Promotion/dissemination of your programme results
 Capitalisation of your programme results
 No concrete benefits
 Other (please specify)

- 7a. Other (please specify)

1 character(s) minimum

- 8. How could the **EUSDR support** your activities in the future to enhance the cooperation with your organisation/programme? (multiple selection possible)

- More effective use of the EUSDR MA networks for the embedding of the EUSDR into the programmes
 Better understanding on how the EUSDR can be relevant to your work
 (Joint) Targeted activities for project beneficiaries
 Harmonisation of capitalisation strategies (e.g. for reporting purposes)
 Involvement of EUSDR stakeholders in preparation of joint calls
 Involvement of EUSDR stakeholders in evaluation of calls
 Other (please specify)

- 8a. Other (please specify)

1 character(s) minimum

9. What **kind of support from the EUSDR bodies** (National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators, European Commission, Danube Strategy Point) would be useful for your future work?

1 character(s) minimum

10. What activities have been carried out within your programme to **facilitate the embedding** of the EUSDR into your organisation/programme?

1 character(s) minimum

• 11. Has a **network or structured dialogue** been established with EUSDR bodies (Danube Strategy Point, National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators, European Commission)?

- Yes
- No
- Other (please specify)

• 11a. If yes, which are the results?

1 character(s) minimum

• 11b. Other (please specify)

1 character(s) minimum

12. Which of the [EUSDR embedding tools/activities](#) developed for the period 2021-2027 were used in your programme?

	Not aware of it	Aware of it, but not used	Used /planning to use
• Guidance/discussion papers by the EUSDR Presidencies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• EUSDR Embedding Tool Annex 1a (Excel-Table)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• EUSDR Embedding Tool Annex 1b (compilation of funding instruments)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
• EUSDR Embedding Leaflet for managing/programming authorities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

• Overview of embedding surveys of EUSDR MAs /programming authorities and NCs	●	●	●
• EUSDR Embedding Weeks	●	●	●
• Newsletters on funding opportunities/open calls provided via EuroAccess	●	●	●

13. Which have been (if any) **possible challenges** in the embedding process in your programme, and how could they be addressed?

1 character(s) minimum

Section D: Added value of the EUSDR

• 14. In which of the following activities could the **cooperation with the EUSDR be relevant** for your programme in the period 2021-2027 and 2027+? (multiple selection possible)

- Cooperation in the preparation of your programme strategy 2027+
- Joint preparation and implementation of targeted projects (e.g. specific calls, etc)
- Support the selection of programme project proposals with strategic macro-regional relevance
- (Higher) coordination with other programmes and funding mechanisms in the Danube Region
- Involvement in the relevant EUSDR implementation reporting cycles
- Programme calls dissemination at various EUSDR events (e.g. [EUSDR Annual Forum](#))
- Participation in [Embedding Weeks](#)
- Participation in EUSDR Priority Areas events/SG meeting
- Participation of EUSDR stakeholders in project events
- Capitalisation of your programme results and synergy building
- Capitalisation of your programme results included in EUSDR reporting and monitoring system
- Higher visibility of your programme results through [EUSDR website](#), EUSDR [Priority Areas websites](#), media campaigns on social media ([Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [X](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Bluesky](#), [YouTube](#))
- Cooperation with and implementation of the [Danube Strategy Flagships](#)
- Higher outreach to relevant stakeholders in the Danube Region
- Follow-up of EUSDR Embedding Week
- Revival of financial dialogues
- Other (please specify)

14a. Other (please specify)

15. How can the **contribution of your programme towards the EUSDR be enhanced** in the period 2021-2027 and 2027+?

1 character(s) minimum

16. Which could be the **main triggers** that can enhance the contribution of your programme towards the EUSDR?

1 character(s) minimum

• 17. In your view, what is the **unique added value of the EUSDR** that would be lost without the Strategy? (multiple selection possible)

- Focused approach on jointly tackling common challenges in the Danube Region
- Structured framework for promoting multi-level governance and coordinated actions across the participating countries
- Cooperation framework for concrete political activities
- Cooperation framework for concrete policy activities aside from (national) policies
- Established platform for fostering cooperation and knowledge exchange between participating countries (social capital)
- Joint coordination of funding instruments for relevant projects/initiatives
- Policy platform for supporting the enlargement process
- Other (please specify)

• 17a. Other (please specify)

1 character(s) minimum

End of the survey

Any further comments or recommendations.

• Please enter **your official e-mail address** for eventual enquiries.

Thank you for the contribution to this survey!

More information about the EUSDR can be found on the [EUSDR website](#).

If you need further information about the EUSDR and/or this evaluation, you may contact the Danube Strategy Point (office@eusdr-dsp.eu) and the Evaluation Officer of the Danube Strategy Point, Mr Raphael SACHS (raphael.sachs@eusdr-dsp.eu).

5.3 Annex 3: Evaluation matrix

Table 4: Evaluation questions and judgment criteria

Sub-Evaluation Questions (ref. EP and ToR)	Judgement criteria (JC)
KEQ 1. To what extent is there sufficient political commitment for the implementation of the EUSDR?	
Sub question 1.1: How can the political commitment to the EUSDR be assessed and improved? (1.a) ⁴⁸ , What are best practice examples for promoting MRS on the political level? (1.b)	JC 1.1 The political actors (Ministers of EUSDR states, EUSDR Presidency & TRIO, NCs) fulfil the roles assigned to them according to the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper and support the implementation of the EUSDR: the political formats are held regularly, and responsible stakeholders take part in the formats to ensure the flow of information, events are clearly documented and the results achieved to ensure greater political awareness of the EUSDR, the political actors implemented their work programme, the political actors provide policy orientation and strategic guidance and promote joint initiatives the NCs fulfil their tasks for the Strategy, the NCs have the capabilities, resources and good knowledge to fulfil their tasks for the Strategy.
Sub-question 1.2: What is the impact and influence of EUSDR high-level meetings (e.g. Ministerial, Parliamentary), of the (4 MRS) TRIO PCY formats on the implementation of the Strategy, EUSDR and on national/regional levels, and how can these be further enhanced in the future? (1.c, 1.d)	JC 1.2 EUSDR high-level meetings (Ministers of EUSDR states, EUSDR Presidency & TRIO, NCs) have a positive impact and influence on the Strategy and on national/regional levels: conclusions and recommendations of the meetings are translated into action, the high-level meetings have a positive impact on the EUSDR implementation (e.g. enhanced collaboration, commitment, resource mobilisation).
KEQ: 2. To what extent is the overall governance system functional and supports a coherent Strategy development and an accompanying progress monitoring?	
Sub-question 2.1: How can the roles and responsibilities among key stakeholders of the EUSDR and their fulfilment be assessed? Where is room for improvement? (2.a)	JC 2.1 The EUSDR core stakeholders fulfil their roles and responsibilities according to the governance architecture and support the implementation of the EUSDR: the roles and responsibilities of EUSDR core stakeholders are clearly defined, and well-understood by them, the European Commission (EC) strategically supports the implementation of the EUSDR in cooperation with the participating states, Council and European Parliament, EUSDR (TRIO) Presidency, the National Coordinators (NCs), the Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) ⁴⁹ , fulfil the roles and responsibilities assigned to them according to the governance architecture and supports the implementation of the EUSDR, the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) fulfils its role and responsibilities as a strategic working unit and supportive body for the EUSDR, the Danube Youth Council (DYC) fulfils its role and responsibilities as a platform for institutional youth involvement and promotion of youth-related topics and participation in the EUSDR.
Sub-question 2.2: Which workflows / processes work well and which should be improved? (2.b)	JC 2.2 The workflow/processes between the EUSDR core stakeholders work well. different types of communication channels are used for the various information and coordination processes at EUSDR and PA level,

⁴⁸ The numbering of sub-questions in brackets represents the questions listed in the EUSDR Evaluation Plan and ToR, (each bullet point in the ToR/EUSDR Evaluation Plan corresponds to a number, e.g. sub-question 1a, 1b, etc.).

⁴⁹ Steering Groups and the Working Groups (where available) are addressed in sub-question 3.1 below.

Sub-Evaluation Questions (ref. EP and ToR)	Judgement criteria (JC)
	<p>the information flow is designed to be meaningful and well-structured for EUSDR core stakeholders,</p> <p>there is regular contact and information flow between NCs and PACs,</p> <p>there is regular contact and information flow between PACs across the PAs,</p> <p>there is regular contact and information flow between the DSP and the EUSDR core stakeholders,</p> <p>there is regular contact and information flow between the EC and NCs, PACs and DSP,</p> <p>any administrative burden or bureaucratic hurdles (e.g. during reporting, staff onboarding etc.) are removed or reduced to allow EUSDR core stakeholders focus on their key EUSDR implementation activities (e.g. projects, Danube Strategy Flagships, networking etc.).</p>
<p>Sub-question 2.3: What is the impact of strong/well elaborated agendas (e.g. by the (TRIO) PCY) on the governance of the Strategy? (2.c)</p>	<p>JC 2.3 Elaborated agendas by the EUSDR (TRIO) Presidencies have a positive impact on the governance of the Strategy</p> <p>strategic topics/priorities were set by the EUSDR (TRIO) Presidencies in the reference period,</p> <p>the strategic topics/priorities set were followed up by the NC, PAs, DSP</p> <p>strategic topics/priorities brought (new) positive outcomes.</p>
<p>Sub-question 2.4: How can the involvement of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) in the EUSDR be assessed? What are the learnings from the DYC (pilot project)? How and in which fields can the Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON) contribute to the EUSDR? What is needed for a successful development of the DYON and its impactful contribution to the EUSDR? (2.d)</p>	<p>JC 2.4 DYC/DYON⁵⁰ proactively and meaningfully incorporated their issues into the Strategy implementation</p> <p>DYC have been given opportunities for meaningful content-wise contributions to the EUSDR, e.g. by suggesting topics, giving recommendations/advice or elaborating inputs which are then taken up by the EUSDR,</p> <p>recommendations/input/actions/topics suggested by the DYC to EUSDR decision-making processes are suitable and have been taken into account,</p> <p>the contribution of the DYC (including the quality of the recommendations/input/concrete actions/topics provided) was well received by the EUSDR core stakeholders</p>
<p>Sub-question 2.5: Does a coherent system of defining and reviewing the needs in the Danube Region, actions and targets exist, which is followed when updating the EUSDR Action Plan? (additional)</p>	<p>JC 2.5 A coherent system of defining and reviewing the needs in the Danube Region, actions and targets is developed and followed when updating the EUSDR Action Plan (<i>additional</i>).</p> <p>the intervention logic pathways are strong</p> <p>all EUSDR relevant stakeholders have been consulted when revising the EUSDR Action Plan 2020,</p> <p>the broad thematic scope of the EUSDR Action Plan allows for the necessary flexibility of the EUSDR,</p> <p>the EUSDR Action Plan 2020 addresses existing or emerging needs in the Danube Region,</p> <p>actions of different PAs are coherent and complement each other.</p>
<p>Sub-question 2.6: Does the monitoring system collect data that reflect the actual progress towards EUSDR objectives and measure the effectiveness of governance structures? (additional)</p>	<p>JC 2.6 A robust monitoring system is in place which collect data that reflect the actual progress towards EUSDR objectives and measure the effectiveness of governance structures (e.g. biennial EC MRS Implementation Report, Danube Monitor of PA 9, PAC Reporting to the DRP, ESPON MRS.ESPON platform)</p> <p>qualitative and quantitative data are collected on a regular basis,</p> <p>the data collected through the established monitoring tool reflect the actual progress in all PAs,</p> <p>the reporting and monitoring requirements do not create unnecessary administrative burden or bureaucratic hurdles for the EUSDR core stakeholders (e.g. PAC, NC, DSP),</p>

⁵⁰ Since the DYON establishment is still ongoing, it will be considered in the context of its future contribution to the EUSDR.

Sub-Evaluation Questions (ref. EP and ToR)	Judgement criteria (JC)
	EUSDR evaluations conducted are based on available quantitative and qualitative data.
KEQ 3. To what extent is the technical implementation and policy coordination in the Priority Areas (PAs) successful?	
Sub-question 3.1: How can the involvement of stakeholders in the EUSDR/PAs be improved? (3.a)	JC 3.1 Steering Groups (SG) and optional Working Groups (WG) fulfil the roles assigned to them according to the governance architecture and support the implementation of the EUSDR the SG members fulfil their tasks for the Strategy, the SG members have the capabilities, resources and good knowledge to fulfil their tasks for the Strategy (e.g. to express national positions, to take decisions and to vote in a SG meeting, etc.), the optional WGs fulfil their tasks for the Strategy, the optional WGs have the capabilities and good knowledge to implement the actions.
Sub-question 3.2: How has cooperation (intensity) between EUSDR core stakeholder groups in the EUSDR changed over time? How can this cooperation be further improved? (3.b)	JC 3.2 Interaction among key stakeholders in the EUSDR at different levels has been actively intensified over time: at operational level between DSP and EC, NCs, PACs, EUSDR (TRIO) Presidency, SG and optional WG, at the state level between NC and EC, SG members, EUSDR TRIO Presidency, at the highest level between EUSDR TRIO PCY, PCY and EC.
Sub-question 3.3: What are the main gaps prevailing in the technical implementation of the EUSDR? (3.c)	JC 3.3 The EUSDR key stakeholders utilise the available instruments in the technical implementation (3.c) EUSDR core stakeholders with capacities, resources and knowledge are involved in different decision-making processes of the Strategy implementation (e.g SG, WG, etc.), interaction between EUSDR core stakeholders during the implementation (meetings, participation, aim and results of the meetings, etc.), communication to primary target groups, embedding tools, reporting and monitoring system.
Sub-question 3.4: Do the communication measures reach the primary target groups as defined in the EUSDR Communication Strategy effectively? (additional)	JC 3.4 Adequate communication tools (e.g. online tools, media, success stories, Danube Strategy Flagships, etc.) are used to reach the primary target groups in line with the EUSDR Communication Strategy the EUSDR communication Strategy is subject of evaluation, (tailor-made) communication activities/ tools/channels are used addressing the primary target groups, all primary target groups defined in the EUSDR Communication Strategy are addressed, new stakeholders are reached beyond the Strategy stakeholders.
KEQ 4. To what extent is it possible to obtain funding for the EUSDR implementation?	
Sub-question 4.1: How can the (expected) absorption of different funding sources in the 2021–2027 programming period be assessed? (4.a)	JC 4.1 The IJG/ERDF & JTF, ESF programmes, IPA/NDICI and Interreg programmes 2021–2027 contribute to the objectives of the EUSDR (comparison of the specific objectives with the EUSDR priorities in terms of coherence and financial allocation). amount of funding allocated to specific objectives contributing to EUSDR (per PA, state), other/new EU/non-EU and national funds are utilised, there is an improvement of embedding EUSDR in EU/non-EU funding and national funding instruments in the period 2020–2024, embedding actions have led to better alignment/increased funding and do not increase administrative burden.

Sub-Evaluation Questions (ref. EP and ToR)	Judgement criteria (JC)
<p>Sub-question 4.2: How can the operation of EUSDR managing authority networks (ESF+, CF/ERDF, IPA/NDICI) support and put into practice the embedding of EUSDR into funding programmes? (4.b)</p>	<p>JC 4.2 Bodies, such as the ERDF/CF/ESF+ MA networks and the IPA/NDICI programming authorities' network and the DSP are now in place to facilitate continuous support for embedding and for a stronger "macro-regional thinking and acting" within (EU-) funding programmes.</p> <p>EUSDR MA networks use various activities to support the embedding process, EUSDR MA networks have the capacities to support the embedding process, project proposals/suggestions can be taken up by other EU (centrally or shared management) programmes or national/subnational programmes.</p>
<p>Sub-question 4.3: How can cooperation among national/regional, actors from EU and EU candidate countries responsible for programming and programme implementation be ensured, in order to effectively monitor the outcomes of the aligning of EUSDR and different funding mechanisms, with special focus on synergies, avoiding overlaps and efficiency of work? (4.c)</p>	<p>JC 4.3 Cooperation platforms/networks are in place and regularly used to strengthen the dialogue among national/regional, actors from EU and EU candidate countries in the Danube Region.</p> <p>These platforms/networks (e.g. EUSDR MA networks) can be used to discuss where and how cooperation could be improved (e.g. to select project ideas with macro-regional relevance, to work for better access to funding for macro-regional labelled projects, to regularly monitor the outcomes of the aligning of EUSDR and different funding mechanisms, with special focus on synergies, avoiding overlaps and efficiency of work).</p>
<p>Sub-question 4.4: What could be done to further develop synergies for the implementation of (strategic) projects and processes? How could the EUSDR improve the information flow on implemented (strategic) projects and processes in the 12 thematic fields? (4.d)</p>	<p>JC 4.4 In the 12 PAs all available approaches are used to support initiatives and projects of macro-regional relevance in order to achieve a more effective joint implementation of projects and Danube Strategy Flagships and the establishment of softer/more flexible forms of cooperation, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> upstreaming existing single projects, platform projects to bring together different existing projects, joint project proposals for new initiatives related to strategic topics, conduct of Strategic calls on PA actions by EU-programmes, pro-active approach to mobilise actors and develop joint proposals, assignment of external experts to facilitate project development, strengthening of thematic networking platforms and matching events related to PA topics.
<p>KEQ 5. To what extent has the EUSDR implementation generated short or long-term outcomes?</p>	
<p>Sub-question 5.1: What concrete policy outcomes have been generated by the Strategy on regional, national and EU level? What are the territorial differences (e.g. urban vs. rural, in EU and EU candidate countries)? (5.a)</p>	<p>JC 5.1.1. Strategic outcomes were generated in the reference period, such as.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improved coordination mechanism and strategic frameworks (e.g. thematic platforms, intergovernmental agreements, joint plans, strategic calls, EUSDR high-level meetings, government programmes/ documents/declaration/policies/institutional uptakes), improved participation, dialogue, knowledge exchange and project generation (e.g. information exchange activities, trainings, facilitation of project development, networking and matching events.), projects of macro-regional relevance. <p>JC 5.1.2 All EU and EU candidate countries participating in the EUSDR can demonstrate concrete strategic outcomes.</p> <p>JC 5.1.3 Priority Areas achieved the targets defined in the EUSDR Action Plan.</p>
<p>Sub-question 5.2: What can be done to generate more strategic outcomes in the short, mid and long term? (5.b)</p>	<p>JC 5.2 Follow-up activities and solutions are developed in order to generate more strategic outcomes.</p>

Sub-Evaluation Questions (ref. EP and ToR)	Judgement criteria (JC)
<p>Sub-question 5.3: How do changes in EUSDR structures (e.g. for action and decision-making) and processes determine policy outcomes? (5.c)</p>	<p>JC 5.3 Changes in the EUSDR structure and processes in the reference period had a positive impact on policy outcomes.</p>
<p>KEQ 6. To what extent did the external factors influence the implementation of the EUSDR?</p>	
<p>Sub-question 6.1: To what extent did the external factors influence the implementation of the EUSDR? (additional)</p>	<p>JC 6.1 Influence of external factors on the implementation of the EUSDR positive or negative impact of external factors on different EUSDR governance levels (e.g. Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, etc.), main barriers for successful implementation (e.g. resource limitations, staff changes, etc.) main drivers for successful implementation (e.g. enlargement process, existing cooperation structures, existence of "leader" states or organisations triggering the implementation etc.)</p>

Source: M&E Factory 2024