

13th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

20 – 21 June 2024

Vienna, Austria

Conference
Report

Cooperation in the Danube Region: Now more than ever!

Shaping Transformation,
Creating Opportunities



Interreg
Danube Region



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Conference Report of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum in Vienna

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Annual Forum is a key event aimed at fostering dialogue, collaboration, and the exchange of best practices among stakeholders involved in the implementation of the Danube Region Strategy. It brings together participants from various sectors to discuss regional development, cooperation, and strategies for the Region. The Forum is organised by the rotating Presidency of the EUSDR (held by one of the 14 participating countries) supported by the Danube Strategy Point (DSP), as well as National Coordinators and Priority Area Coordinators from all 14 EUSDR countries.

The EUSDR Annual Forum addresses a diverse audience, including government representatives from participating countries, EU institutions, regional organisations, civil society groups, NGOs, academia, and research institutions. Businesses, investors, and international financial institutions also participate, contributing perspectives on economic development, environmental protection, connectivity, and institutional capacity. By bringing these stakeholders together, the Forum promotes coordinated efforts to enhance the overall prosperity and sustainability of the Danube Region.

The EUSDR Annual Forum 2024 was organised by the Austrian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, represented by the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management and the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, together with the City of Vienna as host city.

Under the title **'Cooperation in the Danube Region: now more than ever! Shaping Transformation, Creating Opportunities'** the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum aimed to be a platform for joint discussions on current challenges and opportunities as well as future perspectives for the cooperation in the Danube Region. Facing geopolitical threats, economic volatility and severe effects of global climate crisis, cooperation in the Danube Region has become more important than ever. Working together across borders proves to be an opportunity to develop joint perspectives for a stable, sustainable and prosperous future not only for the Danube Region, but for all of Europe.

Added value through cooperation in the Danube Region as seen by the Presidency

Danube Region – Thriving through cooperation:

Discover the power of international cooperation and local investment in bridging gaps and creating sustainable solutions in the Danube Region: on occasion of the Austrian EUSDR Presidency 2024, the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management has published a folding map on the added value of cooperation in the Danube Region entitled “Thriving through cooperation”. The map is accompanied by videos on 6 added values.

Impact stories videos:

[Awareness building and common values \(Fem4Forest project\) ↗](#)

[Immediate impact on everyday life \(Danube Cycle Plans project\) ↗](#)

[Knowledge building and exchange \(CD Skills project\) ↗](#)

[Realise new potentials through cooperation \(Living Danube Limes project\) ↗](#)

[Stability through cooperative structures ↗](#)

[Transnational solutions for common problems \(Life Restore for Mura-Drava-Danube project\) ↗](#)

[Impact stories map ↗](#)



Map of the Danube Region: biodiversity, culture and interesting facts

Programme Overview

WED, 19 June

18:30 – 22:00 Welcome reception @ charter ship MS Admiral Tegetthoff

THU, 20 June

08:00 – 08:45 Registration @ Aula der Wissenschaften

08:45 – 09:30 Opening of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum

09:30 Press conference

09:30 – 10:45 **The Danube Region: Diversity and integration**
Opening lecture, state of the region report, panel discussion

11:15 – 12:30 **Mayors' talk: Cities as transformation hubs of the Danube Region**
High-level panel discussion

12:30 – 13:30 Lunch break

13:30 – 15:30 **Green transition: Shaping transformation, creating opportunities**
Keynotes and thematic parallel sessions

16:00 – 17:30 **Geopolitics, stability, prosperity and future perspectives in the Danube Region**
Keynote and high-level panel discussion

19:00 – 22:00 Danube party @ Palmenhaus

FRI, 21 June

08:00 – 09:00 Registration

09:00 – 10:45 **Future perspectives for a fruitful cooperation in the Danube Region**
Take-aways from the parallel sessions, interviews, keynotes and impulses

11:15 – 12:15 **Get involved: What do we need for a future-proof cooperation?**
World Café

12:15 – 12:55 **Closing session: Wrap-up & take-aways**
Key messages from the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum

12:55 – 13:00 Conference closing and farewell

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch break

14:00 – 17:00 **Field trips: Site visits in Vienna and Lower Austria**

- Site visit 1: Boat trip in Donau-Auen National Park: LIFE WILDIsland
- Site visit 2: Tour of the Port of Vienna: thinkport VIENNA
- Site visit 3: Tour of the Danube Island: LIFE DICCA Project (Vienna)
- Site visit 4: BOKU River Lab (Vienna)
- Site visit 5: Danube Salon, Europaforum Wachau (Krems)

Welcome Reception

The evening before the official start of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum, all participants were invited by the City of Vienna to join the Welcome Reception on board of the charter ship MS Admiral Tegetthoff. The guests were warmly welcomed by **Alena Sirka-Bred**, Head of International Relations at the Chief Executive Office of the City of Vienna, **Robert Lichtner**, Coordinator of the Danube Strategy Point, and the captain of the ship, **Johannes Kammerer**.



Captain Johannes Kammerer, Robert Lichtner, and Alena Sirka-Bred at the welcome reception on the MS Admiral Tegetthoff



Night view of Vienna from the open deck of the river cruise



Dinner on the river cruise at the welcome reception

**13th Annual Forum
of the EU Strategy
for the Danube Region**

20 – 21 June 2024
Vienna, Austria

13th EUSDR Annual Forum – Day 1



Opening of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum



Mayor Michael Ludwig, Federal Minister Norbert Totschnig, and Secretary General Nikolaus Marschik at the opening of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum

The 13th EUSDR Annual Forum in Vienna was opened through welcome speeches by the event's hosts from the City of Vienna, the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management of Austria, and the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria, as well as by the European Commission.

H.E. Michael Ludwig, Mayor and Governor of Vienna, highlighted the city's role as a hub for international dialogue and its strong economic development, which has been bolstered by EU enlargement. He stressed the importance of cities in implementing the Danube Region Strategy and invited mayors to discuss the urban dimensions of regional cooperation. Additionally, Ludwig emphasised the necessity of a European framework for cities to ensure social and affordable housing.

H.E. Norbert Totschnig, the Austrian Federal Minister for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, underlined the Danube's significance as a connector for countries and emphasised priorities such as water management and clean water supply.

He highlighted successful cross-border cooperation projects in the field of flood risk management and encouraged continued collaborative efforts for a resilient Danube Region, emphasising the importance of green transition and youth involvement.

H.E. Niklaus Marschik, the Austrian Secretary General for Foreign Affairs, emphasised Austria's deep emotional and economic ties to the Danube, discussing stability, security, and European integration as key priorities, especially given Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine. He highlighted the Danube Region's importance for Ukraine's grain exports and future recovery efforts.

In her video message, **H.E. Elisa Ferreira**, EU Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, stressed the need for cooperation to address geopolitical shifts, the digital revolution, the green transition, and demographic changes. She highlighted the Danube Region Strategy's role in innovation, digital transition, green transition, and EU enlargement, encouraging deeper partnerships with cities and civil society to leverage the Strategy's potential.

Press Conference

The opening was followed by a press conference. Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg, Federal Minister Norbert Totschnig, responsible for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, and the Mayor of the City of Vienna, Mr Michael Ludwig, were available to answer questions from international and Austrian journalists.



Informal encounter between the Mayor and the Ministers before the press conference



Mayor Michael Ludwig, Federal Minister Norbert Totschnig, and Federal Minister Schallenberg at the press conference

The Danube Region: Diversity and integration

Two distinguished speakers set the frame for further discussion throughout the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum:

The opening lecture was held by **Hannes Swoboda**, retired Member of the European Parliament (MEP) and President of the International Institute for Peace. He shared personal insights about his roots in a diverse Region along the Danube. He emphasised the Danube Region's unique ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, advocating for viewing it as an opportunity rather than a challenge. Swoboda addressed historical conflicts driven by external powers and highlighted the renewed security concerns due to the unprovoked Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. He stressed the importance of a comprehensive European migration and integration strategy, underlining the need for integrating both long-standing minorities and new migrants. Cultural activities were noted as key in promoting tolerance and respect. Swoboda concluded by urging active integration policies and addressing social consequences of economic reforms to fulfil the expectations of the Region's citizens.

He was followed by **Mario Holzner** from the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies who provided an economic analysis showing significant regional disparities. He called for a new growth model focusing on digital and green transitions, and highlighted demographic challenges such as aging populations and outward migration. Finally, Holzner suggested policy recommendations for regional cooperation, including joint research and development (R&D) investments, digital revolution initiatives, and a focus on affordable housing. [Find the full presentation here ↗](#)

The inputs were followed by a panel discussion including **Imre Csalagovits**, Head of the Managing Authority at the Interreg Danube Region Programme, **Alexandra Schantl**, Coordinator for European Governance and Urban Policy at the KDZ Centre for Public Administration Research, and **Sławomir Tokarski**, Director of European Territorial Cooperation at DG REGIO of the European Commission.

The panel discussion highlighted several key points. First, it emphasised the importance of strong, multi-level governance for the effective implementation of the Danube Region Strategy, discussing the need for better integration of local, regional, and national policies. Second, it stressed the importance of involving businesses, academia, and diaspora groups in regional planning and governance, highlighting the role of local democracy and citizen participation in fostering regional development. Lastly, the discussion focused on the potential for the Danube Region Strategy to support EU enlargement, prepare candidate countries, and promote innovative projects and regional diversity for economic and social development.



Sławomir Tokarski, Imre Csalagovits, and Alexandra Schantl discussing current challenges in the Danube Region

Mayors' talk: Cities as transformation hubs of the Danube Region

Highlighting the importance of regional cooperation on the local scale, the Mayor of Vienna, **Michael Ludwig**, invited his colleague mayors from the EUSDR capitals and partner cities to Vienna. Six mayors followed the invitation and joined Mayor Ludwig in a high-level panel discussion on the vital role of cities in the Danube Region:

- **Ion Ceban**, Mayor of Chişinău
- **Gergely Karácsony**, Mayor of Budapest
- **Benjamina Karić**, Mayor of Sarajevo
- **Wassil Terziew**, Mayor of Sofia
- **Tomislav Tomašević**, Mayor of Zagreb
- **Gennadiy Trukhanov**, Mayor of Odesa

In his welcome speech, Mayor Michael Ludwig emphasised the common urban challenges across cities, such as ensuring essential services, managing population growth, and maintaining high living standards. He highlighted Vienna's transformation from a city on the periphery to a central European hub, benefiting significantly from EU enlargement. Ludwig underlined the importance of sustainable urban living, showcasing Vienna's climate initiatives. He also stressed the social dimension of urban policy, advocating for social and affordable housing and addressing inequality. Ludwig called for stronger urban voices in EU decision-making, welcoming fellow mayors to collaborate on these critical issues.



Family picture of the Mayor of Vienna with fellow Mayors from the Danube Region and the conference participants

The panel discussion focused on collaboration among European cities within the framework of the Danube Region Strategy. The Mayor of Budapest addressed housing and climate crises by revitalising inner-city areas, aiming to restore Budapest's population while maintaining liveability.

The Mayor of Sofia advocated for integrated R&D and innovation, proposing the use of technology to enhance citizen engagement and direct democracy.

The Mayor of Zagreb stressed the benefits of joint public procurement and resource sharing for disaster response, calling for EU regulations on housing and taxation of empty properties, and celebrated Zagreb's recognition for social policies.

The Mayor of Chişinău discussed direct citizen interaction and public consultations, promoting cultural and economic exchanges in the Danube Region, and invited participants to the Chişinău Days in Vienna (23 June 2024).

The Mayor of Sarajevo emphasised local engagement through citizen assemblies and urban planning to tackle housing and municipal challenges, advocating for increased city involvement in decision-making.

The Mayor of Odesa highlighted the city's critical role and pressing infrastructure needs, calling for European support in rebuilding damaged transport routes and energy projects, while addressing the severe impacts of Russia's ongoing and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine.

Finally, the Mayor of Vienna emphasised the shared challenges faced by cities, the importance of collective action within the EU, and expressed solidarity with Odesa.

Green transition: Shaping transformation, creating opportunities

The afternoon session of the EUSDR Annual Forum focused on the overarching theme of the green transition. The topic was introduced through a video message by **H.E. Leonore Gewessler**, Federal Minister for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology of Austria. The minister highlighted the serious state of the climate, noting record-breaking temperatures and extreme weather events in 2023 and 2024 in Europe. She emphasised the need for joint action through the European Green Deal, the Fit for 55 package, and the Repower EU initiatives to reduce emissions, lower gas consumption, decrease dependency on Russian gas, and boost renewable energy sources. Gewessler also stressed the importance of a just transition to a green economy, which includes creating high-quality jobs, achieving cleaner air, and ensuring a healthier natural environment.

The minister was followed by **Mark Olefs**, Head of the Climate Research Department at Geosphere Austria. His presentation emphasised the critical need for a swift transition to green technologies, underscoring how human activities have substantially heightened carbon dioxide emissions, thereby accelerating global warming. Olefs stressed the irreversible long-term consequences of climate change, urging immediate measures to curb emissions and bolster climate resilience. Additionally, he highlighted the economic toll of climate change, citing rising weather-related economic losses across the EU and health risks exacerbated by heatwaves. Olefs' presentation painted a stark picture of the current climate crisis, advocating for proactive steps to mitigate its impacts and transition towards sustainable practices.

The inputs were complemented by a practical example of success from the Republic of Moldova. **Carolina Novac**, State Secretary, Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Moldova, presented Moldova's strategic initiatives to enhance energy security and resilience, particularly in light of regional instability caused by the war in Ukraine. She detailed Moldova's proactive steps to reduce dependence on Russian gas by diversifying its energy sources. This includes significant advancements in renewable energy, with Moldova doubling its installed capacity in just one year. Novac highlighted several key

projects underway, including the implementation of renewable energy auctions, initiatives to improve energy efficiency, and the establishment of interconnections with Romania's energy grid. These efforts are pivotal as Moldova aligns itself with EU standards and requirements in preparation for accession. Overall, Novac underscored Moldova's strong commitment to a green transition, viewing it not only as a strategic energy imperative but also as a crucial component of its path towards EU integration and sustainable development. Her presentation illustrated Moldova's proactive stance in navigating energy challenges and embracing renewable energy solutions to ensure long-term energy security and sustainability.

[Find the full presentation here ↗](#)

Following the presentations, the participants of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum were asked to join in on one of eight parallel sessions on diverse topics related to climate change and adaptation, water and ecology, or sustainable economy. The large number of parallel sessions allowed for relatively small groups to come together in a more interactive atmosphere. The parallel sessions were hosted and organised by different EUSDR and Danube Region stakeholders who also provided short summaries of the main points discussed.

Session 1: How to accelerate community-led green energy initiatives in the EUSDR

Session host:

EUSDR Priority Area 2 – Sustainable Energy

- Moderator: **Annamária Nádor**, Head of Division, Business Development and Communications at Mining and Geological Survey of Hungary, Coordinator of EUSDR PA 2
- Impulse lecture: **Simone Burster**, Danube Office Ulm
- Good practice project: **Andrej Slančík & Lucia Bogdány**, Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency
- Discussants: **Zoltán Haász**, Director South Transdanubian Regional Innovation Agency, Lead Partner of NRGCOM project, **Irina Apostol**, Green City Lab Moldova, Member of the Danube Youth Council, and **Horst Schindler**, Project Officer, Interreg Danube Region Programme

Local low-carbon energy actions have an increasing importance in the clean energy transition. However, they are less widespread in the Danube Region, especially in its Eastern part. One of the Danube Strategy Flagships of the EUSDR Priority Area 2 – Sustainable Energy aims to promote local, citizen-driven energy actions. The aim of this session was to discuss various technical and socio-economic aspects of creating appropriate conditions for renewable energy communities in the Danube Region and how to raise awareness of the benefits of such initiatives by sharing experiences and good examples from the Region.

Two projects were presented as impulse lectures, the European Energy Award along the Danube project by Simone Burster from the Danube Office Ulm, and the Just Energy Transition for Central Europe project by Andrej Slančík from the Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency. Based on these presentations and the following discussion moderated by Irina Apostol, Danube Youth Council member, and Zoltán Haász, leader of the NRGCom project, the participants identified several key challenges and opportunities for the development of energy communities.

Key challenges identified

The main hindering factor is the unclear legislative environment that should be updated and unified along the Danube Region to support the creation and functioning of energy communities. Regulatory authorities should be prepared for the new conditions. Other main challenges are the lack of appropriate funding sources (in particular to cover investment costs) and motivation as well as the unclear market conditions such as the question of pricing and the settlement with the grid provider.



Presentation of the good practice project REC4EU by Lucia Bogdány from the Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency

Key opportunities identified

However, there are several opportunities that should be exploited such as to identify available funding programmes, to educate the public and raise awareness, to establish cooperation with the grid provider, to present good practices, to take advantage of the new technologies, to use investment subsidies and to motivate citizens with lower energy bills.

The current energy crisis can be considered both a challenge and an opportunity. It is obviously a huge challenge for the whole Region, but at the same time it will force us to support alternative solutions to speed up the green energy transition and one of these solutions is the creation of energy communities.

[Find the session presentations here ↗](#)

Session 2: Strategic actions towards a circular economy in EUSDR cities and regions

Session host: City of Vienna

- Moderator: **Philipp Preuner**, Director's Office for Climate Affairs, City of Vienna
- Impulse lecture: **Bernadette Luger**, Executive Group for Construction and Technology, City of Vienna, Coordinator of Do-Tank Circular City Vienna
- Good practice project: **Martina Le Gall Maláková**, President at Industry Innovation Cluster Slovakia
- Discussant: **Florian Kamleitner**, ecoplus - Business Agency of Lower Austria

The transition to a resource efficient and circular economy will be key for cities and regions to reach climate neutrality. This requires accounting for consumption-based emissions and developing actions for strategic hotspot sectors and instruments. During the discussion of this session, systemic change and collaboration appeared to be crucial because linear routines do not comply with a circular and resource efficient economy.

Key challenges identified

Hence, the singular implementation of circular approaches in a linear system is a major challenge, for example in the construction sector. This relates to market barriers – such as the price for dismantling building components – and legal barriers – such as extracting resources from the waste regime. In addition, the lack of cross-sectoral processes and a missing mindset of being able to reuse old products and materials are challenges identified during the discussion.



Florian Kamleitner from ecoplus commenting on strategic actions towards a circular economy

Key opportunities identified

During the discussion, the participants of the session highlighted new business models as an important opportunity of circular economy. Circular knowledge can be exported, too. The circular transition could be an opportunity for data policy, as circularity requires stakeholders to connect along sectors and value chains while pushing for better data connectivity. In terms of dependency on importing resources today, a local and regional circular economy can be an opportunity for strengthening resilience as well.

[Find the session presentations here ↗](#)

Session 3: Place-based innovation for reindustrialisation projects in the Danube Region

Session host: Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia with support of the EUSDR Priority Area 8 – Competitiveness of Enterprises

- Moderator & good practice project: **Grit Ackermann**, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia
- Impulse lecture: **Jonathan Loeffler**, CEO of Steinbeis Europa Zentrum
- Discussant: **Johannes Gabriel**, Senior Project Officer, Interreg Danube Region Programme

Place-based innovation plays an increasingly important role in regional development. It is a concept that examines local resources, infrastructure, institutions, and the talent pool, leveraging the strengths of regional actors to foster innovation and economic transformation. Public interventions, such as regional or local funding schemes, infrastructure development, collaboration initiatives, and regulatory support, are crucial in enabling innovation within a specific place or location. In the session, the participants explored key elements of a good place-based innovation ecosystem and how less developed regions and smaller urban municipalities can develop a place-based innovation system to drive growth and economic prosperity for local reindustrialisation projects, such as brownfields.



Grit Ackermann from the Slovenian Chamber of Commerce and Industry on a reindustrialisation project

Key challenges identified

The challenges identified include the need for funding to initiate change. This encompasses not only public funding but also private investments. There is a lack of know-how at the local level on how to attract such funding and deal with investors. Other challenges relate to the community, local people, and businesses. Balancing the demands and requirements of private investors interested in a local reindustrialisation project with the needs of the local community that wants to ensure balanced and sustainable brownfield development benefiting the residents is crucial.

Key opportunities identified

The primary opportunity for a reindustrialisation project lies in the potential for economic growth and job creation. Such initiative would provide new prospects for young people in the Region and support local businesses. By focusing on green and future-oriented jobs, a revitalisation project would not only preserve the industrial heritage and identity of the site but also ensure a sustainable future. Planning a mixed-use development of the brownfield site to serve both businesses and the community would maximise the benefits, fostering a vibrant and dynamic local economy.

[Find the session presentations here ↗](#)

Session 4: New approaches for resilient waterway management

Session host:

EUSDR Priority Area 1a – Waterways Mobility

- Moderator: **Gert-Jan Muilerman**, Head of Department Strategy & International Affairs, viadonau and EUSDR PA 1a
- Impulse lecture & good practice project: **Viktoria Weissenburger**, Head of Team Action Programmes & Projects, viadonau, EUSDR PA 1a
- Discussants: Manfred Seitz, **Director General**, Danube Commission and **Lisa-Maria Putz-Egger**, Professor for Sustainable Transport, University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria

The session on “New approaches for resilient waterway management” emphasised the environmental benefits of Danube navigation and its vital role in the European economy. Key topics included the green characteristics of Danube waterway transport, challenges from low water levels and climate change, and innovative waterway management methods. The session highlighted that inland navigation is crucial for the European economy and greener than expected, advocating for nature-based solutions to enhance resilience.

Key challenges identified

Main challenges for Danube navigation include the slow green transition, climate change impacts such as extreme weather events, a shortage of qualified nautical personnel, and the need to adapt to new market segments. These factors complicate efforts to maintain sustainable and efficient waterway transport.

Key opportunities identified

Opportunities discussed in the session highlighted the need for greater flexibility in waterway maintenance measures and the adoption of sustainable waterway management practices. Embracing innovative and nature-based solutions can help mitigate the impacts of climate change and ensure the resilience of the Danube navigation system. The emphasis was on sustainable practices that not only address current challenges but also enhance the long-term viability and environmental friendliness of inland waterway transport.



Manfred Seitz, Director General of the Danube Commission, on new approaches to resilient waterway management

Session 5: Is the water clean and passable enough for fish to survive?

Session host:

EUSDR Priority Area 4 – Water Quality

- Moderator: **Danka Thalmeinerová**, EUSDR PA 4
- Introduction: **Birgit Vogel**, International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), Márton Pesel, EUSDR PA 4
- Impulse lecture: **Martin Mišík**, Association of Bratislava Boating Clubs
- Discussants: **Raimund Mair**, World Bank Water Global Practice, **Marlene Haimann**, BOKU Vienna – University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Institute of Hydraulic Engineering and River Research (IWA), **Katarína Mravcová**, Water Research Institute, Bratislava, **Irene Lucius**, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), **Gusztáv Csomor**, Senior Project Officer, Interreg Danube Region Programme

We live in challenging and fast-paced times, requiring us to continually respond with transformation; we need to turn challenges into opportunities. Water is in crisis: it is either too abundant, polluted, or scarce. Many measures have been taken for improvement, but we still need to do much more to reduce pollution from urban areas, industries, and agriculture.

Key challenges identified

- Hydromorphological alterations pressure rivers, and balanced sediment management is needed to provide habitats for riverine species. Several projects are dedicated to developing an integrated sediment management plan for the Danube.
- Barriers impact rivers and species. There are 1.2 million barriers in place in Europe, impounding 200,000 kilometres of rivers, and causing a 93 % decline in migratory species.
- Sturgeon species are disappearing and transboundary cooperation to tackle this problem and to take measures is needed.

Key opportunities identified

- Basin-wide cooperation is the key tool for success.
- Coordinated transboundary monitoring is the key instrument for well-informed decisions and to deliver evidence and facts.
- Stakeholder involvement and awareness raising are key.
- Investment is needed as well as human capacities.

Additional comments from audience

- Right governance in this respect is critical.
- The Interreg Danube Region Programme currently supports many activities within projects to improve the situation in the Danube Basin.
- Challenges have to be identified carefully, tackling these with measures to maintain the Danube as a connector for species, habitats and humans.

[Find the session presentations here ↗](#)



Danka Thalmeinerová from EUSDR Priority Area 4 introduces the session on water quality and fish

Session 6: Navigating nature's extremes: Understanding the dynamics of floods and droughts

Session host:

EUSDR Priority Area 5 – Environmental Risks

- Moderator: **László Balatonyi**, Hungarian Coordinator of EUSDR PA 5
- Impulse lecture: **Prof. Helmut Habersack**, Head of the Institute of Hydraulic Engineering and River Research at BOKU Vienna - University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences
- Good practice projects: **Ádam Kovács**, ICPDR - Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, **Dor Fridman**, IIASA – International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, **Megha Mukim**, Senior Economist, World Bank, and **Péter Molnár**, General Directorate of Water Management Hungary

The session "Navigating nature's extremes: Understanding the dynamics of floods and droughts" highlighted the critical importance of proactive management of environmental risks within the Danube Region.

Key challenges identified

The invited experts underscored that climate change is no longer a distant concern but an urgent reality requiring comprehensive strategies. Experts highlighted challenges like the increasing intensity of rainfall, shifting runoff patterns, and the loss of floodplains in the Danube Basin, with floodplain reductions of up to 80%. The discussion emphasised that current policies are often reactive, lacking proactive measures essential for managing drought risks and mitigating cascading impacts such as wildfires and landslides, which disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

Key opportunities identified

The session also explored opportunities for enhancing resilience through integrated approaches and strategic investments. Panellists advocated for nature-based solutions, such as floodplain reconnection, improved irrigation systems, and strengthened institutional capacities, especially in the Western Balkans. The adoption of innovative tools like Hungary's Operational

Drought and Water Scarcity Management System was highlighted as a model for effectively managing drought impacts. Additionally, participants stressed the need to translate existing policies into actionable measures, integrating successful pilot projects into common practices across the Region.

The discussion concluded with a call for a proactive shift in managing environmental risks, emphasising knowledge sharing, improved data utilisation, and the development of comprehensive management strategies. By embracing these approaches, the Danube Region can better navigate the increasing threats of floods and droughts, fostering greater resilience and sustainability.

[Find the session presentations here ↗](#)



Megha Mukim from the World Bank presenting the Country Climate and Development Report on the Western Balkans

Session 7: Skills and education for the green transition

Session host: EUSDR Priority Area 9 – People & Skills (in cooperation with EUSDR Priority Area 7 – Knowledge Society)

- Moderators: **Roland Hanak**, Federal Ministry for Labour and Economy of Austria and **Jürgen Schick**, Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research of Austria, both Coordinators of EUSDR PA 9
- Impulse lecture: **Julia Fellingner**, 3s Research & Consulting
- Good practice projects: **Paul Köfler**, Aufleb-Umweltstiftung and **Katerina Schilling**, The Voice of the Danube, International Association of Water Service Companies in the Danube River Catchment Area (IAWD)
- Discussants: **Jana Fingerhut**, Bertelsmann Stiftung Green Skills – Competences for Sustainable Economy and **Stephen Halligan**, Senior Project Officer, Interreg Danube Region Programme



Moderator Jürgen Schick (PA 9) on the panel with discussants Jana Fingerhut, Katerina Schilling, Julia Fellingner, and Stephen Halligan

In the face of challenges in connection with the green transition, promoting inclusiveness and intensifying cooperation between various stakeholders is a prerequisite. The Centres of Vocational Excellence provide a setting for networking and exchange, with the GREENOVET platform focusing in particular on fostering green innovation in Vocational Education and Training (VET). Good practices such as the

Foundation for the Environment in Austria aiming at (re) integrating unemployed into the green economy through qualification, and the Utility Management Training as an accredited programme aimed at training both technical and non-technical experts in this sector, showcase successful approaches for conveying green skills and referring trainees to green jobs.

Key challenges identified

In view of the climate crisis and continuous efforts to drive the green transition, the need for green and digital skills continues to grow. However, challenges such as demographic changes or rapid developments on the labour market like the emergence of new green jobs, have an adverse impact on skills development and exacerbate the skills shortage. Apart from facilitating the development of green skills, promoting changes in attitudes to make them more conducive for the green transformation is also necessary. The lack of a common understanding of green jobs and the required green skills is often challenging, further hampering transition processes.

Key opportunities identified

Green skills cover a wide range and a holistic approach can provide broad opportunities for skills development. To this end, fostering cooperation between various stakeholders from education, research and companies can improve skills. Key opportunities for driving the green transition can emerge from the interplay of formal education, high quality VET, and innovative approaches aimed at reskilling, upskilling or enabling lifelong learning, as for instance presented in the good practices. Empowering people to develop broad skills sets can offer solutions for skills shortages or mismatches and create a conducive environment for a green and, most importantly, also a fair transition.

[Find the session presentations here ↗](#)

Session 8: Stream of consciousness – arts and culture as discursive spaces for transformation in the Danube Region

Session host: Collegium Hungaricum Vienna, in cooperation with EUSDR Priority Area 3 - Culture and Tourism

- Moderator: **Márton Méhes**, Director of Collegium Hungaricum Vienna
- Introduction: **Irina Cozma**, Coordinator EUSDR PA 3
- Impulse lecture: **Eszter Dávida**, KÉK – Hungarian Contemporary Architecture Centre
- Good practice project: **Christina Jaritsch**, Bad Ischl Salzkammergut 2024, Head of Programme Ecology, Agriculture & Social Affairs, Head of Evaluation
- Discussants: **Diána Berecz**, BALATORIUM project, **Rainer Prohaska**, Artist and **Natália Liholot**, Project Officer, Interreg Danube Region Programme

The panel aimed to show how cultural projects in the Danube Region serve as discursive spaces for developing future concepts in the context of the Green Transition. The presented best practice projects proved how arts and culture mediate between scientific facts and common sense, bring actors together, ask questions and sensitise or involve people on the local level. Among others, the many European Capitals of Culture in the area, Interreg Danube Region Programme cooperation projects or the New European Bauhaus initiative seem to be innovative platforms for this future dialogue, and were therefore invited to the workshop.

Key challenges identified

The participants identified several good initiatives running but they need better communication and promotion throughout the Region. Otherwise, they would remain invisible. In the field of culture, it is possible to achieve a lot with few resources, but to use this advantage, small scale financial tools are needed. The participants argued for a better cross sectoral communication and better interconnection of municipalities. It was also stated that the activation and participation of young people is still a challenge. Cultural tourism is also an important tool of exchange and learning but the distribution varies greatly within the Region.

Key opportunities identified

The workshop agreed that culture, arts, but also cultural tourism have some unique features compared to other fields: Culture is a kind of social laboratory, a “safe space” for new approaches. Arts and culture are reflexive and critical. Many European Capitals of Culture function as official catalysers of the Green Transition, boosting environmental change and sustainability issues. Artistic projects raise awareness and sensitise people on the ground for the facts – especially festivals, “event clusters” or thematic series. They “teach” by experience and adventure. The cultural sector is able to integrate bottom-up and top-down processes at the same time.

[Find the session presentations here ↗](#)



Christina Jaritsch presenting the European Capital of Culture 2024: Bad Ischl Salzkammergut

Geopolitics, stability, prosperity and future perspectives in the Danube Region

The last session of the day focused on the geopolitical dimensions of cooperation in the Danube Region and was opened by a speech by the European Commissioner for Budget and Administration, **Johannes Hahn**, which focused on the Danube Region's future in the European Union. He reflected on his past roles in regional policy and enlargement, highlighting their importance. Hahn addressed geopolitical challenges, noting global authoritarian trends and the impact of conflicts like Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine. Hahn emphasised the role of the EU in upholding global order through rules and agreements, applicable in the Danube Region. The Commissioner stressed the need for EU support to stabilise neighbouring countries, emphasising stability, prosperity and competitiveness to combat brain drain. He highlighted the Region's diversity and potential as a role model within Europe. Hahn advocated for enlargement, urging both the EU and accession countries to meet obligations promptly. He concluded by urging unity and cooperation within the EU, calling for discussions to integrate the Danube Region fully into the EU.

The Commissioner's speech was followed by a high-level panel discussion with the following distinguished speakers:

- **H.E. Mihai Popșoi**, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova
- **Velina Tchakarova**, Geopolitical Strategist
- **Sava Mitrović**, European Policy Centre – CEP, Belgrade
- **Timo Blenk**, Agora Strategy Group
- **Mislav Kovač**, Croatian EUSDR and EUSAIR National Coordination, Directorate for European Territorial Cooperation, Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, Republic of Croatia
- **Igor Studennikov**, Centre for Regional Studies

The discussion centred on several key themes related to the Danube Region's geopolitical and economic landscape. The speakers emphasised the Region's vulnerability to global conflicts and stressed the importance of infrastructure integration, cybersecurity collaboration, and the private sector's involvement in bolstering regional stability. Croatia's accession to the EU served as a model, highlighting the transformative impact of the Danube Region Strategy in fostering regional cooperation and capacity building. Ukrainian civil society's crucial role in recovery efforts and ecological restoration was underscored, alongside calls for a unified agenda between Ukraine and Moldova to enhance cross-border cooperation. Economic perspectives focused on innovation hubs and shared infrastructure as drivers of stability and prosperity, while discussions on the Western Balkans highlighted the Strategy's role in preparing countries for EU membership and fostering regional integration. Geopolitical concerns centred on countering Russian aggression through EU-led cooperation and infrastructure development. Moldova highlighted the Danube Region Strategy's significance in its path towards EU accession, emphasising the need for enhanced connectivity and resilience through regional strategic partnerships.



Geopolitical experts on the panel: Igor Studennikov, Mislav Kovač, Timo Blenk, Sava Mitrović, Velina Tchakarova, Mihai Popșoi, and Johannes Hahn

Danube Party

The evening culminated on invitation of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and water Management at the Danube Party held in a historic Art Nouveau greenhouse in Vienna's centre. The guests were welcomed by **Georg Schadt**, Head of the Department for Regional Policy and Spatial Planning in the Federal Ministry. Next to music, food and drinks, the programme included the ceremonial transfer of the Danube-WILDIsland-Ramsar Initiative patronage to the ICPDR, as well as a captivating performance from the award-winning Danube Art Master troupe from Serbia.

The winners of the Danube Art Master competition in action



Birgit Vogel, Gerhard Bachner, and Vlatko Rožac during the ceremonial transfer of the patronage of the Danube-WILDIsland-Ramsar Initiative to the ICPDR



Vienna's Palmenhaus provided a beautiful backdrop for the Danube Party



**13th Annual Forum
of the EU Strategy
for the Danube Region**

20 – 21 June 2024
Vienna, Austria

13th EUSDR Annual Forum – Day 2



Future perspectives for a fruitful cooperation in the Danube Region

The second day of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum was dedicated to the debate on the future of cooperation in the Danube Region.

The session was opened by Georg Schadt, Head of the Department for Coordination - Regional Policy and Spatial Planning in the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, who stressed the significance of territorial and macro-regional cooperation in the context of future EU cohesion policy 2028+. He emphasised the need for the integration of various policy linkages in discussions on future cooperation frameworks for the Danube Region and highlighted three key questions:

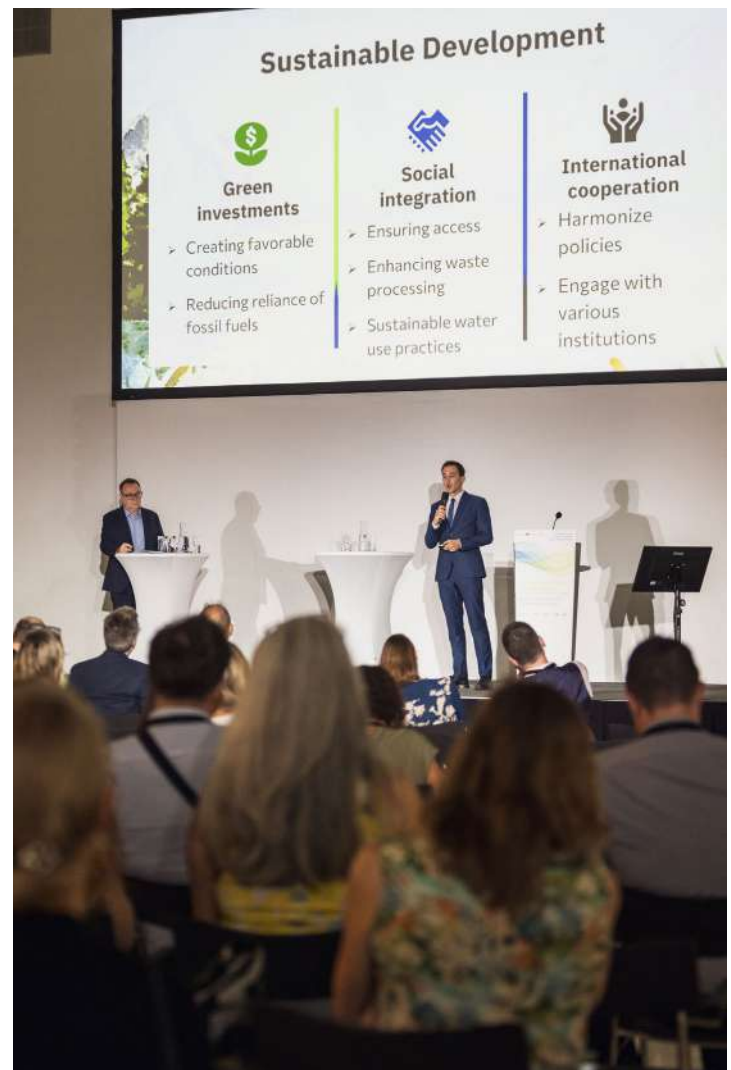
- What are the framework conditions for cooperation in the Danube Region? What will change in the future, what will remain unchanged?
- How will cooperation in the Danube Region evolve in the future? Which stakeholders need to be involved? What further instruments should be utilised?
- What steps are needed to be taken now to move in this direction?

To bridge the gap to the previous day, **Katharina Lenz**, Pillar Officer at the Danube Strategy Point, and **Claudia Singer-Smith**, Coordinator of EUSDR Priority Area 10, then provided a brief summary of the eight parallel sessions. They focused on the green transition and emphasised the need for regulatory frameworks, investment in skills, stakeholder mobilisation, and the importance of integrating local initiatives into transboundary cooperation.

Moray Gilland, Head of Unit for Macro-regions, Transnational, Interregional and External Cooperation and Enlargement at the European Commission/DG REGIO, emphasised the uniqueness of each macro-region, including the Danube Region, and the need for a broad and adaptable framework. He discussed the increasing political recognition of territorial cooperation in general and the Interreg Programme in particular as a fundamental added value of the European Union. He also recognised the need for simplified procedures

and invited stakeholders to provide input on future cooperation frameworks through consultations.

Christiane Breznik from the City of Vienna, European Affairs, advocated for the effectiveness of Interreg programmes in addressing complex urban challenges. She highlighted the importance of continuity, simplification, and participatory programming processes, emphasising the role of cities in proactive cooperation and the need for solidarity in cross-border projects.



Philip Tudor presenting the Danube Youth Council's Vision 2040 for the Danube Region

Sanda Šimić Stambolić, EUSDR National Coordinator at the Ministry of European Integration of Serbia, highlighted the importance of cooperation for non-EU countries in the accession process. She advocated for increased funds for cooperation programmes and for opening up more EU-programmes for accession countries to build capacity and familiarity with EU dynamics, emphasising the unique opportunity for accession countries to participate on equal footing with EU member states in these programmes.

The institutional perspectives were followed by the presentation of research on changing framework conditions in Europe and the Danube Region by **Kai Böhme** from Spatial Foresight and **Franziska Sielker**, Professor at the Institute for Spatial Planning, TU Wien. Sielker and Böhme highlighted the increasing importance of cooperation amidst transformative changes, digitalisation, industrial shifts, and climate change. They emphasised the need for innovative, large-scale cooperation and the urgency of engaging in policy-shaping now. They also discussed the Strategy's pivotal role in fostering effective cooperation, stressing the importance of proactive, multi-level governance to address diverse regional challenges and harness future opportunities.

[Find the full presentation here ↗](#)

Kicking off the open debate with inspirational impulses from the field, stakeholders who bring the Strategy to the ground shared their insights through Pecha Kucha presentations. These distinguished individuals, directly involved in various projects, offered their concrete experiences on implementing the Strategy and highlighted its potential to immediately impact the lives of people in the Danube Region. These short impulse reports aimed to motivate EUSDR stakeholders by showcasing achievements and identifying areas of need.

Georgios Zisimos, Head of Unit for Policy Advice at the European Training Foundation (ETF), focused on the importance of skills development and human capital for the Region's future, emphasising the need for data-driven approaches and international cooperation in education and training.

[Find the full presentation here ↗](#)

Nataliia Pokhyliuk, founder and chairwoman of ABLE – Act, Build, Lead, Engage, a Ukrainian NGO in Germany, shared experiences of civil engagement in supporting Ukrainian refugees and promoting sustainable practices. She emphasised the importance of partnerships and networking in addressing common challenges.

[Find the full presentation here ↗](#)

Srdan Stankovic, founder and director of Supernatural, presented a case study on transforming a waste dump into an environmental park in Belgrade, Serbia. He highlighted the role of youth engagement and creative initiatives like the Friends of Danube clothing brand in promoting environmental awareness.

[Find the full presentation here ↗](#)

Philip Tudor, member of the Danube Youth Council (DYC), presented the DYC 2040 Vision for the Danube Region. He engaged the audience by asking them to envision the Danube's future, emphasising the need for a sustainable and thriving Region. Tudor outlined the DYC's key recommendations: advancing sustainable development, enhancing peace and security, leveraging science and innovation, improving economic frameworks, and ensuring robust youth involvement in the EUSDR. The vision includes fostering green investments, crisis preparedness, and equitable youth representation in policy-making. He concluded with a call for collaborative efforts to address future challenges and preserve the Danube Region.

[Find the full presentation here ↗](#)

The diverse inputs and perspectives shared during the morning session laid the groundwork for the interactive discussion that followed, focusing on the future of cooperation in the Danube Region in the framework of the EUSDR.

Get involved: What do we need for a future-proof cooperation in the Danube Region?

Now is the perfect time for a structured discussion about future frameworks for cooperation in the Danube Region and for providing inspirational input of relevance for the EUSDR actions to a debate on the upcoming post-2027 period and the new EU Cohesion Policy in this respect. The World Café Session aimed for a forward-looking exchange by gathering inputs from all EUSDR stakeholders. Eight World Café tables were hosted by EUSDR Priority Areas, funding programmes, and the youth:

- **Resilient waterways as a strategic resource for the Danube Region**
Iris Marstaller and Viktoria Weissenburger (EUSDR PA 1a)
- **Climate Change Adaptation**
Annamária Nádor (EUSDR PA 2) and László Balatonyi (EUSDR PA 5):
- **Investing in People and Skills – More Crucial Than Ever!**
Jakob Weiss and Barbara Willsberger (EUSDR PA 9)
- **Supporting EU Enlargement through macro-regional cooperation – What do we need to involve civil society organisations and sub-national stakeholders to support the path towards EU accession?**
Claudia Singer-Smith and Jernej Grahor (EUSDR PA 10)
- **Danube Region Programme – evolving with time for the benefit of the citizens of the region.**
Michal Pavlik and Simona Ene (DRP)
- **Cooperation is central: Developing solutions together for the common challenges of the Danube Region and beyond.**
Dana Kascakova and Frank Schneider (Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE)
- **Upscaling, downscaling, clustering: advancing cross-border cooperation between Austria and Czechia.**
Kathrin Huber and David Freudl (Interreg AT-CZ)
- **Involvement of young people: What are chances and challenges for a future-proof cooperation in the Danube Region?**
Danube Youth Council

The World Café discussion evolved around visions and ideas for cooperation in the Danube Region. For stimulating the discussion, the following guiding questions were proposed:

- What are the framework conditions for cooperation in the Danube Region? What will change in the future, what will remain unchanged?
- How will cooperation in the Danube Region evolve in the future? Which stakeholders need to be involved? What further instruments should be utilised?
- What steps do we need to take now to move in this direction?

All stakeholders were invited to take the opportunity to engage in discussions on the future and take away valuable insights. The results will be fed into relevant follow-up discussions by the Austrian EUSDR Presidency.

Resilient waterways as a strategic resource for the Danube Region

Iris Marstaller and Viktoria Weissenburger (EUSDR PA 1a)

1. Future framework conditions

The future framework for resilient waterways in the Danube Region involves adapting to climate change, integrating sustainable practices, and enhancing collaboration among Danube countries. It focuses on developing regulations and policies that support green technologies and nature-based solutions, ensuring that waterways remain a strategic resource. The emphasis is on creating robust infrastructure and management systems that can withstand environmental challenges while supporting economic growth.

2. Future stakeholders and instruments

Future stakeholders include national and regional governments, environmental organisations, navigation companies, and local communities. Instruments for resilience involve public-private partnerships, funding

mechanisms for green technologies, and collaborative platforms for sharing best practices. Stakeholders will need to work together to implement policies that support sustainable waterway management and leverage innovative technologies to enhance resilience.

3. Steps to take now

Immediate steps include investing in infrastructure upgrades, promoting research and development of green technologies, as well as fostering international cooperation. Implementing nature-based solutions and flexible waterway maintenance measures are crucial. Additionally, enhancing training programmes for nautical personnel and raising awareness about the importance of resilient waterways will help build a strong foundation for future sustainability and economic stability in the Danube Region.



Viktoria Weissenburger and Iris Marstaller moderating the World Café table on resilient waterways

Climate Change Adaptation

Annamária Nádor (EUSDR PA 2) and László Balatonyi (EUSDR PA 5)

Climate change is one of the main and most complex issues of our times that needs to be tackled on every level and it requires close cooperation in every possible way. At the World Café discussion, EUSDR Priority Area 2 – Sustainable Energy and EUSDR Priority Area 5 – Environmental Risks together hosted a discussion on the need for a more climate resilient Danube Region.

1. Future framework conditions

The discussion attracted a wide range of stakeholders of which all agreed that the most important future frameworks are the EU policies. Political will is indispensable to tackle the impacts of climate change, to mitigate its consequences and prevent further damages. The EU has some new and promising initiatives such as the Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change and the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) regulations. At the same time, we should not forget that there are non-EU countries in the Region, not obliged by the EU regulations, which also need clear guidelines and support. Green bonds are also a good way to support clean energy transition of the Region.

2. Future stakeholders and instruments

The most important future stakeholders and instruments are financial sources and authorities. Every possible financial source should be taken into consideration, not just traditional funding programmes, but also alternative solutions such as market funding and crowd funding. Legislation shall follow and support the regions, cities, communities in their efforts to fight against the impacts of climate change.

3. Steps to take now

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the involvement of citizens is also a key element to make a difference. It should be a first step to take. Education and motivation of the public is of utmost importance, and for that clear messages, understandable and available research, good examples, right communication channels, appropriate incentives and available fundings are needed. The participants also highlighted that the most promising nature-based solutions must be chosen.



László Balatonyi from PA 5 engaged in the discussion on climate change adaptation

Investing in People and Skills – More Crucial Than Ever!

Jakob Weiss and Barbara Willsberger (EUSDR PA 9)

1. Future framework conditions

The development of skills must be ensured even under fragile and challenging framework conditions (e.g., the recent pandemic and the ongoing and unprovoked Russian war of aggression against Ukraine). Investing in people and skills should be based on data-driven evidence, reflecting the socio-economic framework conditions, and responding to the needs and demands on the labour market.

Creating fair working conditions across all European countries is considered crucial to respond to the brain drain in the Danube Region and to enable brain circulation. Providing an up-to-date educational framework/system (e.g., teaching methods, updated curricula including green and digital skills, innovation capacity) is essential to respond to (future) skills demands.

2. Future stakeholders and instruments

The valuable input of the Danube Youth Council shows the relevance of involving young people into policy development and giving them a voice, also beyond the institutional frameworks of the Strategy and for the Danube Region as a whole. Increasing the youth involvement is therefore crucial.

It is necessary to raise awareness for financial instruments existing at national, transnational and supranational levels, and to simplify them, removing obstacles for smaller organisations.

Settings such as the International Stakeholder Conference of Priority Area 9 and the EUSDR Annual Forum provide opportunities for facilitating exchange between labour market and education policy stakeholders from different institutional backgrounds, enabling mutual learning and knowledge exchange.

3. Steps to take now

Countries and regions often face similar challenges. The creation of networks and opportunities for exchange between stakeholders in order to tackle these challenges can create an added value.

The validation and recognition of formal and non-formal qualifications across EU Member States and accession countries is an important factor to support cohesion across Europe.

Promoting Vocational Excellence is of great importance in the future, as this is a relevant driver for re- and up-skilling and for regional development through the creation of a regional skills eco-system. This concept should be further strengthened, also in the Danube Region, e.g., through the Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence, initiated by Priority Area 9.

Critical thinking will become a relevant skill in future, also for ensuring democratic stability in the Danube Region countries and beyond.



Jakob Weiss and Barbara Willsberger moderating the debate on people and skills at the PA 9 World Café table

Supporting EU Enlargement through macro-regional cooperation – What do we need to involve civil society organisations and sub-national stakeholders to support the path towards EU accession?

Claudia Singer-Smith and Andreea Prasacu (EUSDR PA 10)

1. Future framework conditions

To support EU accession, a shift in mentality towards increased cooperation and repairing the role of sub-national actors is crucial. There should be more opportunities for collaboration between EU and non-EU countries, fostering stronger networks and knowledge transfer. Involving countries in planning and programming, connecting the *acquis* with macro-regional strategies, and creating mentoring systems are essential. Combatting misinformation, improving communication about the benefits of EU membership, and enhancing the capacities of civil society organisations are vital. Understanding national and target group perspectives, and effectively communicating incentives are also important.

2. Future stakeholders and instruments

Engaging youth by offering exchange programmes, scholarships, and involvement in enlargement discussions are key to preventing brain drain. Stronger involvement of academia will boost knowledge, and increased communication by civil society will highlight

the EU's advantages. Ensuring participatory approaches and enhancing peer exchanges through macro-regional strategies are essential. Facilitating exchanges between candidate and new EU members, and promoting good practices from similar contexts/challenges will support positive change. SMEs should also be prioritised to drive improvements. Finally, TAIEX remains an important instrument in aiding EU integration.

3. Steps to take now

Immediate steps include focusing on monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment of initiatives. A robust marketing strategy is needed to effectively communicate EU cooperation benefits, targeting the right groups with the right information and format. Diversified communication routes and an integrated communication approach from the national to regional level are essential. A joint communication strategy will ensure coherent messaging, enhancing understanding and support for EU accession efforts across all levels of society. Active information dissemination and presentation are critical for achieving these goals.



Andreea Prasacu and Claudia Singer-Smith from PA 10 collecting contributions at their World Café table

Danube Region Programme – evolving with time for the benefit of the citizens of the region. Michal Pavlik and Simona Ene (Interreg Danube Region Programme)

1. Future framework conditions

All participants agreed on the importance of transnational cooperation and the necessity for it to continue. Member States should consider allocating a higher budget, strengthening result-oriented project implementation, and making extensive use of simplified cost options (SCOs). Additionally, partner states should support national co-financing. Regarding content, regional cohesion is of utmost importance. Participants especially emphasised the need to retain human resources in the Region by creating joint mechanisms, such as “brain circulation, not brain drain.” The Interreg Danube Region Programme should define its mission in terms of enlargement. Furthermore, complementarity with other programmes should be created and embedded in the new programme as a priority.

2. Future stakeholders and instruments

The need for the political level to understand the added value of participating in a transnational programme was emphasised, as well as the importance of setting up national networks with the help of the National Contact Points (NCPs). Additionally, the involvement of young people is very important.

3. Steps to take now

The participants agreed that understanding the leverage effect of EU Interreg financing is a priority. Therefore, actions in this direction should be implemented, including the clustering of projects. When developing the new programme, future trends should be anticipated and included in the programme document. Additionally, stronger cooperation with the EUSDR is necessary.



Simona Ene from the DRP engaged in the discussion at the World Café

Cooperation is central: Developing solutions together for the common challenges of the Danube Region and beyond.

Dana Kascakova and Frank Schneider (Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE)

1. Future framework conditions

The discussion underscored the need to expand cooperation to countries beyond the Danube Region and secure funding across various topics. Identifying complementarities between different instruments and programmes was highlighted as crucial. Programmes like Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE (CE) are essential to extend cooperation beyond the Danube Region and function as bridges connecting various macro-regional strategies (MRS), thereby enhancing synergy between them.

2. Future stakeholders and instruments

Participants stressed the importance of leveraging digital tools and capacity-building to foster cooperation and civil engagement. The Interreg CE applicant community was cited as a good practice. A clear

understanding of stakeholder roles and responsibilities is vital for improved cooperation, as is the attraction of new partners. Effective involvement of multipliers was also deemed essential to broaden the reach and impact of collaborative efforts.

3. Steps to take now

It was recommended that each Interreg programme define its specific niche and make synergies compulsory. Clarifying the mission and role of Interreg in fostering cooperation is essential. Developing additional tools to support cooperation, facilitating civil society participation, simplifying administrative mechanisms, and increasing the budget of Interreg programmes in the next programming period to better support cooperation are immediate steps identified to move forward effectively.



Dana Kascakova moderating the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE World Café table

Upscaling, downscaling, clustering: advancing cross-border cooperation between Austria and Czechia. Kathrin Huber and David Freudl (Interreg AT-CZ)

1. Future framework conditions

It was discussed whether Interreg programmes could be linked to reforms. Most discussants expressed doubts regarding this proposal, as this is a question of competencies and institutional settings. Particularly in decentralised systems, there is often no direct connection between the actor in charge of implementing a reform and the bodies in charge of managing the programmes. However, it was suggested that policy changes should be in the centre of programmes. Interreg often provides leveraging effects, as bigger investments can hardly be implemented. Another proposal was to identify strategic projects already during the programming. This should also embrace securing the commitment of relevant stakeholders or further funds which would be needed for realising the project.

2. Future stakeholders and instruments

For a cross-border cooperation (CBC) Programme, the importance of reaching local actors was highlighted. As an instrument for this goal the small project fund

provides the possibility to realise local activities and gain first experiences with Interreg. Especially in environmental topics such as water retention or restoration measures, solutions are needed on a local level. Providing all the necessary information in both local languages was seen as useful in CBC Programmes. Another aspect that was discussed was the potential of capitalisation, not only to improve results within a CBC but also to build bridges to other funds.

3. Steps to take now

It was also discussed whether the management of programmes should be solved via direct management or shared management in the future. In both cases, the systemic implications should be thoroughly discussed with the Member States. It is crucial that the selection of projects and the decisions on the allocation of funds should be carried out in situ. However, European Commission (EC) should play a stronger role as regards coordination – also in methodological terms. Another future step is to continue and improve the communication and exchange between different funds in orders to provide better visibility and overview for partners.



David Freudl listening to the participants of the Interreg AT-CZ World Café table

Involvement of young people: What are chances and challenges for a future-proof cooperation in the Danube Region?

Danube Youth Council

1. Future framework conditions

In discussing future framework conditions for youth involvement in the Danube Region, key insights emphasised the necessity for meaningful engagement on an equal footing, ensuring youth voices are heard and incorporated into decision-making processes. Creating an approachable and effective environment is crucial, fostering inclusivity across diverse backgrounds, experiences, studies, and work. Flexible financing is essential to support and ensure participation in various events, promoting a dynamic and participatory approach. These conditions collectively aim to cultivate a supportive and empowering atmosphere for youth, enabling them to actively shape the Region's future.

2. Future stakeholders and instruments

The future stakeholders in the Danube Region must encompass youth from diverse backgrounds and experience, including students, young experts, entrepreneurs, and creatives. Bringing these various profiles together with policymakers and key strategists is essential for shaping an inclusive and effective Strategy. Instruments

facilitating this collaboration should be up-to-date and modern, leveraging digital platforms, interactive workshops, and collaborative projects. These tools need to be adaptable and innovative, ensuring active and meaningful participation of youth in the strategic processes, ultimately fostering a cohesive and forward-thinking approach to regional development.

3. Steps to take now

To enhance youth involvement in the Danube Region, there is a need to focus on practical steps. First, leverage the Danube Youth Council (DYC) as a hub to connect with other youth groups and individuals. Increase youth representation in Steering Groups and Priority Areas by involving them in working groups, communication efforts, and active participation. Utilise the experience, knowledge, and training of DYC members to drive this involvement. Expand outreach and share best practices among the EUSDR and the Region's community for successful integration of the youth. Finally, bring together the DYC, Priority Areas, and governance actors to create events and develop new ideas collaboratively, ensuring cohesive and innovative development.



Danube Youth Council members Maty Mihal'ko and Jana Burzykova discussing at the World Café

Closing session: Wrap-up & take-aways Key messages from the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum

In the closing session of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum, key stakeholders from the Danube Region synthesised the main takeaways and future directions for the Danube Region:

Robert Lichtner, Coordinator of the Danube Strategy Point, emphasised the Danube Region Strategy's institutional evolution, noting its development over 13 years and successful youth engagement through initiatives like the Danube Youth Council. He highlighted the need for ongoing alignment between political strategies and project implementations, stressing continuous dialogue with stakeholders.

Imre Csalagovits, Head of the Managing Authority at the Interreg Danube Region Programme, affirmed the Interreg Danube Programme's stability and resilience, particularly its adaptability since the outbreak of the Russian unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine. He advocated for a shift to result-oriented, simplified project implementations and stressed the importance of member states' support and European Commission facilitation.

Nirvana Kapitan Butković, Coordinator of EUSDR Priority Area 8 from the Croatian Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, shared insights from the World Café discussions on issues such as migration, working conditions, brain drain, and youth involvement. She highlighted the necessity of integrating youth perspectives into macro-regional strategies and expanding cooperation beyond the Danube Region to enhance effectiveness.

Roland Arbter, Austrian EUSDR National Coordinator from the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, discussed the Annual Forum's multidimensional approach, emphasising the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders including cities, regions, and civil society. He pointed at ongoing projects informing debates about the future of cooperation policies in the Danube Region and at Austrian Presidency's role in linking these discussions to relevant European processes.

Harald Stranzl, Austrian EUSDR National Coordinator from the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, addressed the geopolitical impact of Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, underscoring the strategic necessity of regional cooperation. He emphasised the role of the Danube Region Strategy in EU enlargement and its potential as a model for integration, while stressing the importance of addressing demographic challenges and involving youth to counteract challenges such as brain drain.



Key messages from Imre Csalagovits, Harald Stranzl, Roland Arbter, Nirvana Butković, and Robert Lichtner at the closing session

Conference closing and farewell

Finally, the two days programme of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum was closed by a farewell of the Austrian EUSDR Presidency, represented by **Elfriede Moser**, Director-General for Forestry and Regions at the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions and Water Management, and the host, the City of Vienna, represented by **Ernst Woller**, President of the Provincial Parliament.

Moser emphasised the importance of breaking down and bridging between silos to achieve comprehensive regional development. Exchanges and the resulting cooperation do not happen on their own but require stable structures and a platform that allows them to happen on a day-to-day basis, this is why she reaffirmed Austria's dedication to the Danube Region Strategy.

Woller emphasised Vienna's historical and ongoing role as a hub for international cooperation and its significance as a host city for international conferences. He underscored the importance of personal and professional exchanges in strengthening networks and fostering cooperation throughout the Danube Region.



Director-General Elfriede Moser and President of the Vienna Parliament Ernst Woller bid farewell

Field Trips: Site visits to places and projects connected to the Danube

After the official closing of the 13th EUSDR Annual Forum, the participants were invited to join one of five different field trips to discover interesting sites in and around Vienna, closely connected to the Danube River and the Danube Region. This was also a great opportunity to continue the networking on a trip with friends and colleagues.

The excursion offer was very diverse and included a boat trip in the Lobau National Park, a tour to the Port of Vienna, a visit at the LIFE DICCA Project on the Danube Island, a tour of the BOKU River Lab, and an invitation to the Danube Salon of the Europaforum Wachau.

Visit to the Life DICCA project
on Danube Island with Dominik
Webel and Christina Erber



River action in the Donau-Auen National Park



Guided tour of the BOKU River Lab with Prof. Helmut Habersack



Presentation of the Port of Vienna by Martin Posset



Governor of Lower Austria Johanna Mikl-Leitner and Federal Minister Karoline Edtstadler opening the Danube Salon at Europaforum Wachau.
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