

EUSDR PA7 29th Steering Group Meeting

6 June 2025, Bratislava, Slovakia | Slovak Centre for Scientific and Technical Information + ONLINE

Minutes

The 29th Steering Group (SG) Meeting of Priority Area 7 (PA7) was organized on 6 June 2025, as a hybrid event. The agenda of the meeting and the list of participants of the PA7 SG meeting are presented in Annexes.

Presentations from the meeting can be found at the following link: <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/information-on-pa7-29th-steering-group-meeting-6-june-2025-in-bratislava-and-online/>

Official welcome on behalf of the PACs, Slovak NC team and DG REGIO

The meeting was opened by **Ms Lubica Pitlova** (Slovak PA7 co-coordinator) who welcomed both onsite and online participants. Especially she welcomed SG members and observers representing 7 Danube Region countries, Ms Elisa COCO as a representative of the DG REGIO, Ms Cristina CUC as a representative of the DSP, Ms Nina BRATKOVA – as a new Slovak National Coordinator of the EUSDR, DYC members and all representatives of on-going and new flagship projects.

Mr Viktor Nedovic (Serbian PA7 co-coordinator) also greeted participants of the 29th PA7 SG meeting and expressed his hope to be able to welcome all participants again in Serbia in the second half of the year. He expressed his wish for a fruitful day full of exchanges on various topics related to the Agenda. In particular, Mr Nedovic mentioned the analyses conducted by both PA7 teams and their working groups and the information gained from the representatives of PA7 flagship projects.

Ms Nina Bratkova (Slovak National Coordinator of the EUSDR) expressed her gratitude to be able to take part at the PA7 SG meeting as the areas of interest of PA7 are very important. Ms Bratkova has highlighted the successful capitalisation event – Boosting Knowledge and Competitiveness in the Danube Region co-organized by PA7 Knowledge Society and PA 8 Competitiveness of enterprises and supported by the Slovak National Coordination team from the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic, which was highly appreciated by the project beneficiaries. Ms Bratkova noted that according to the presented Agenda, the meeting is full of interesting points and wished to all participants a constructive and fruitful exchanges.

Ms Elisa Coco (EC DG REGIO) welcomed all participants and informed them about the news on behalf of the European Commission, starting with the four main priorities of the current European Commission 2024-2029 in place since December 2024: 1) Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness; 2) A

global Europe: Enlargement and relations to neighbourhood, 3) Supporting citizens, supporting young people of the EU, 4) Defence and Security, preparedness of the Union Strategy. Ms Coco mentioned that this year (in July) at the college meeting of the EC the new multiannual financial framework (2028-2035) will be presented, so we will get more familiar how much budget will be available, what will be the main priorities, and how the budget will be allocated, etc. and based on that the new regulations for the programming period 2028-2035 will be drafted. Ms Coco also informed participants about the midterm review of the EU Cohesion Policy. Commissioner Fitto gave an idea how the future will look like in the next programming period pointing out the following priorities: water management and water resilience in Europe, defence and security, together with attention to competitiveness. Approximately 20 days ago (on 13 May 2025) the 5th commission report on implementation of EU MRS was published by the EC and on the same time presented to the REGI committee of the Parliament. By the end of June, the opinion of the Council of European Union with the Polish presidency is expected. The report highlights the implementation of the strategies and their action plans/action plans revisions; support to Ukraine; engagement of youth and creation of youth councils, support of the MRSs to the Commission's priorities: digital, green and fair transition, enlargement. Another of the topics mentioned by Ms Coco was the youth engagement in Interreg MRSs. Youth were consulted on the future of cooperation and on what does the young generation expect from EU and cooperation with the results presented in declaration by young people on the future of territorial cooperation. There were seven recommendations with concrete actions to be taken into consideration for the future, e.g. to reinforce capacity building through Interreg and MRS for applicants, stakeholders – create tailored calls for capacity building; more small-scale projects (max 50 000 €) with 100% co-financing /higher pre-financing / simpler administration and shorter project duration; more large-scale infrastructure projects. To the end of her contribution Ms Coco invited participants to the Macro-regional and Sea basin strategies days which will take place in Brussels on 24-25 September 2025, followed by the high-level group meeting on the Macro-regional Strategies. Ms Coco introduces the main Agenda points (such as 5 different workshops organized by the strategies, speed dating with the Commission DGs or Cross strategies fertilisation session organised by the Assistant Mechanisms and Interact) and informed that the registration will be open in mid-June. (.ppt is available)

Information on PA7 activities in the first half of 2025

Ms Jaroslava Szudi (Slovak PA7 coordination team) prepared a short overview on PA7 activities and news on PA7 coordination, based mainly on the fulfilment of the specific objectives of currently implemented project for priority area coordinators supported by the Danube Region Programme. The project was approved for the period 2023–2028 and involves two partners as the coordinating bodies, i.e. the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information and the University of Belgrade. Ms Szüdi introduced the main outputs in the specific objectives: governance, policy development, support of ongoing and new projects and cooperation between core stakeholders. More concrete information followed within presentations given by the leaders of PA7 working groups. At last, Ms Szüdi presented the themes of the future orientation, such as close cooperation with **EUSDR Presidency, DSP and DRP**, closer cooperation with **other PAs**, better and more active involvement of **DYC to the PA activities**, organisation of **online**

streams to promote science in the region, stable cooperation with ongoing and new **flagship projects**, **support of PA7** engagement in **COST Action SiDnet** focused on Science Diplomacy. (.ppt is available)

Prof. Veskovíc asked a question on the cooperation and promotion Horizon Europe Missions within PA7. He noted the importance of some of the missions for the Danube microregion.

Ms Pitlova answered that PA7 closely cooperates with two flagship projects dealing with the EU missions, concretely TICCA4DANU and HARMONMISSIONS and with the representatives of PA4 dealing with Water Quality, all of which are present at the SG meeting and their presentations will follow later today.

Information from the DSP – Update of the activities & the way forward

Ms Cristina Cuc (Danube Strategy Point) started her presentation with an overview of the activities and priorities of the current EUSDR BiH Presidency. As for the horizontal priorities BiH Presidency focuses on speeding up the EU integration process in connection with its effects on brain-drain, widening skills gap, depopulation and youth unemployment. The thematic priorities are security, civil protection and disaster preparedness, tourism and culture, connectivity and green transition, education, skills and labour market. The main events of the presidency can be read via the QR code inserted in the .ppt. The next point of presentation was devoted to the topic of the process of EUSDR Governance Development Recap, which tends to simplify the processes based on the PACs inputs gained from the meetings of four clusters (PAC roles and responsibilities, SG roles and responsibilities, linkages between stakeholders, PAC co-chair/PAC meetings/BAGL – as an inspiration from other MRs). Ms Cuc also reported on the Embedding and Funding activities. The regular meeting of Managing authorities' network will take place in autumn this year and the EUSDR Embedding week to create partnerships to better embed the objectives of the strategies into the financing programmes. Ms Cuc thanked to PA7 for the contribution to the preparation of the EUSDR Implementing Report (2022-2023) and recommended participants to have a read. Main conclusions, lessons learnt, and outlook on future activities were mentioned, together with special highlights on PA7 contribution. As for the key recommendations, Ms Cuc mentioned the key recommendations such as simplification of the EUSDR governance and enhancing the SG members involvement. As for the Danube Strategy Flagships, Ms Cuc briefly mentioned the process of their selection and usage of the flagship status. At the moment there are 26 Danube Strategy Flagships (15 new and 11 updated ones). The DSP is involved in a social media campaign focused on the flagship projects, preparation of videos of selected projects and other aligned promotion activities in cooperation with PAs. From the Communication activities, Ms Cuc noted that 20 June is the deadline for the testing phase of newly relaunched PA webpages until when PAs can notify DSP about the difficulties, changes or other needs. Another topic concerned the capacity building within the Strategy. Ms Cuc mentioned 5 planned training sessions on onboarding and institutional memory consolidation, policy analysis and advocacy skills, effective communication, collaboration, consensus-building and negotiation skills, strategic planning for EUSDR objective, and leadership and self-leadership. Within the last topic on DSP updates, Ms Cuc informed participants on developments in DYC and DYON and their cooperation within Strategy, and about the planned events. (.ppt is available).

Reports of the PA7 working groups

WG DFCN

Mr Christian Gollubits (BMBWF) reported on the progress of the Danube Region Programme 2021-2027, noting that 226,206,024 € was granted to 139 projects and 1382 partners, based on 2 passed regular calls, PAC call and SMF call. The third call is planned to be launched in the second half of 2025. In the next topic Mr Gollubits informed participants about the structural funds mid-term evaluation, concluding that the framework for cohesion policy investments is not sufficiently aligned with the new EC priorities. Therefore, the EC proposed a couple of changes to accelerate investment in these areas, notably to reinforce the resilience of the EU economy and all its regions. The Commission also proposes extended prefinancing, if the programmes decide to align the priorities in line with the EC ones. The question raised by Ms Martina Hartl to the DSP/DRP was what impact these modifications can have on the future INTERREG Danube programme. For the next MMF the stronger policy alignment will be one of the key topics and MS will be invited to align their funds accordingly. The new Horizon Europe Work Programme of 2025 has been just launched a month ago and the new Work Programme of 2026/2027 is in negotiation with MSs, there are still a lot of opportunities for Danube Region researchers to form the consortia. Mr Gollubits mentioned that several Danube countries formulated their first positions for FP10 (AT, BG, CR, CZ, DE, HU, SI, SK), a specific Joint statement on Widening participation and spreading excellence component in the next EU framework programme for R&I was prepared by 15 countries and a Policy Brief: The Western Balkans on the Road to FP10 was presented. It is expected that the EC will publish the proposal for next MMF in mid-July, which will kick-off the process of negotiations in the Council and Parliament from September 2025. As the next topic, participants were informed about the news on Programme for funding the MSTC projects in the Danube Region which funded 63 multilateral projects so far. The 4th call was launched in autumn last year with eight participating countries (AT, BG, CZ, FR, HR, MN, SK, RS) and 117 project applications received. The selection process will take place on 12 June 2025. The next call shall be open in spring 2026. To sum it up there are several existing possibilities to cooperate within the Danube Funding Coordination (the DRP regular call and SMF calls, Horizon Europe, MSTC, other bilateral and cross-border activities), but is this enough? (.ppt is available)

Mr Sebastian Schäffer (IDM) informed participants about the recent study carried out by the IDM on Danubius Young Scientist Award (DYSA) holders and their career tracking. To find out, the IDM surveyed 120 alumni across 14 countries. With a 70% response rate, this study explores key insights on career advancement, the award process, and future improvements. The survey was followed by 25 selected interviews and a DYSA alumni networking event organized in Vienna in December 2024. Mr Schäffer in his presentation highlighted the key insights captured by the survey, e.g. the majority of the DYSA holders remain working in the region (70 out of 84). An overwhelming majority of awarded remains working in Academia. There is no age limit for applying and receiving the award, but most awardees are in 35-44 years cohort group. The award is open to all research fields with solid distribution from social sciences/ natural sciences / technical sciences. The survey also showed that the award helps in kicking the career of early-stage researchers, increases visibility, builds professional network, opens possibilities for new collaborations and project applications, further promotion, contributes to the future of the region, boosts self-confidence, international recognition, connection within the Danube Region, opportunities to work

abroad. The survey also showed that most awardees learnt about the DYSA from their universities or personal contacts (incl. DYSA alumni). There were a few challenges in the overall DYSA process mentioned in the survey, such as focusing on the region's thematic needs, better promotion and visibility, online process of applications, senior category, etc. The study also showed that the award encouraged and helped to the holders in applying and receiving other types of awards (L'Oréal – UNESCO for Women in Science National Award, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Scholarship, UNESCO Al-Fozan Award, and many more mentioned in the full study). From other success of the DYSA holders can be mentioned MSCA, Marie Curie Seal of Excellence, New York Academy of Science, Otto Wichterle Award, Visegrad-Taiwan Fellowship, Start-up World Cup finalist, ... The [complete study](#) and [ppt are available](#).

WG HEM

Ms Ivanka Popović (University of Belgrade) informed that the activities of the WG HEM is closely related to the work of DRC and the close cooperation continues. Ms Popovic informed participants about the planned [DRC summer school](#), which will take place between 6-12 July 2025 in Vienna and will focus on topics of the future EU enlargement. Ms Popovic also noted that the DRC has been very supportive to the Ukrainian higher education institutions by offering scholarships, research opportunities, and facilitating collaborations. In connection to this, Ms Popovic noted that the MSCA4Ukraine scheme is providing an additional €10 million to support around 50 more displaced researchers from Ukraine, including doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, to continue their work in the EU and Horizon Europe associated countries. This funding is part of the EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and aims to safeguard Ukraine's research and innovation system. According to the recent news the EU Temporary Protection Directive (for the UA refugees) has been prolonged until March 2027, which provides just a temporary solution for researchers, and should be monitored carefully. Within the next point, Ms Popovic presented two charts 1) on published papers between 2017-2024 collected from the WoS, where significant changes in the increased numbers of publications could be observed, and 2) on cooperation links between researchers based on the WoS showing that the research capacity in the region is increasing. In the next point focused on Western Balkans Mobility Scheme driven by POLICY ANSWERS flagship project, participants were informed that 31 proposals were received for this call out of which 22 proposals received funding for a total amount of 101.677 €. Ms Popovic also briefly mentioned three of currently implemented DRP SMF projects EDUREGION, URGE and NUANCE which are contributing with their orientation to the work of WH HEM. EDUREGION focuses on more competitive Danube Region in the international education and research market. URGE addresses also the Danube Region universities and their role in revitalizing growth and empowerment in the Danube Region. NUANCE aims to long-term policy improvement programme addressing the decline in the relevance of universities in modern economies and government decision-making processes. (.ppt is available)

Mr Mladen Kraljic (University of Maribor) prepared a brief overview on DRC Initiative Fund for early career researchers coordinated by the University of Maribor, which is going to be performed again addressing three targets of PA7: increased number of mobilities, publication and better usage of existing research infrastructures. Via this fund the DRC offers students of doctoral study programmes at DRC member universities the possibility to obtain financial means for developing applicants' projects,

solutions, prototypes. DRC is ready to support outstanding students and young scholars' projects which can have a positive impact in the region. The advantage is a smooth (not demanding) administration process. The available budget for projects remained 50.000 € and it is envisioned that no more than 25 applications will be accepted for funding, or a maximum of 5,000 EUR may be granted per application, depending on the addressed target areas. Mr Kraljic also noted that this fund became an inspiration for establishment of other similar schemes (such as POLICY ANSWERS Western Balkans Mobility Scheme or EUSALP rectors conference adopting a similar funding scheme).

WG RIS3

Mr Viktor Nedovic (UoB, Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia) informed participant about the news from the WG RIS3. At first, he mentioned the [POLICY ANSWERS Webinar: Smart Specialisation in EU Enlargement Countries](#) (co-organised with EUSDR PA7) organized in March 2025. The speakers were Emanuele Fabbri (EC DG JRC), Prof. Dr Viktor Nedovic, Dr Lazar Zivkovic (Institute of Economic Sciences, Belgrade) and Dr Dijana Strbac (Institute of Economic Sciences, Belgrade and member of the PA7 Serbian co-coordination team).. Another important topic of the WG RIS3 is the development of the Study on unveiling research synergies in Danube Region based on RIS3. The study is currently being reviewed and after its completion, the SG members will be informed about the scope, key findings and recommendations. The final study will be presented at the upcoming PA7 SG meeting in the second half of the year. As the future proposed topics for collaboration in the Danube Region based on the study results are bridging the regional disparities, supporting the non-EU countries in capacity building, infrastructures development, access to the EU-funding, cross-border cooperation, cooperation of identifies institutions, targeting emerging fields, mentoring and knowledge sharing, stronger cooperation links between EUSDR priority areas. Afterwards, Prof Nedovic mentioned numerous activities carried out within the European training foundation project Skilling up the Western Balkans agri-food sector: digitalising, greening, which recognizes that agrifood is the most common sector in all countries in the region. Finally, Prof Nedovic informed participants about the development of the Serbian new RIS3 Action Plan (2026-27), as the current one should be finalized by the end of 2025.

WG ERA

Ms Lubica Pitlova and **Ms Jaroslava Szudi** presented a brief overview of the WG ERA activities, including the information on finalized Midterm evaluation of the participation of the Danube countries in Horizon Europe, preparation of the [Reflection on the preparation of the 10th EU Framework Programme for research and innovation from the perspective of the Danube Region](#) and the report from the PA7 + PA8 [Capitalisation workshop „Boosting Knowledge and Competitiveness in the Danube Region](#). Ms Pitlova presented the main points from the PA7 reflection toward FP10 such as support to the excellence, green and digital transformation, increasing role of AI, stimulation of public-private cooperation, data-driven economy, and the autonomy, integrity and security of research, but also emphasized that geographical location, regulatory environment and market dynamics also play an important role in shaping innovation outcomes. PA7 in its reflection supports increased budget to raise success rates, especially for MSCA and collaborative projects; expresses support to projects with macro-regional focus (e.g. addressing specific

ecological, societal and health challenges); support to capacity building through Widening calls and/or similar schemes like „Advancing Europe“; support for regional projects focused on specific aspects required for faster integration into the ERA, support for schemes with geographic approach to build up experience; etc. Ms Szudi prepared a short overview of the PA7+PA8 Capitalisation workshop held on 26-27 March 2025. The workshop hosted 22 EU-funded projects from 11 countries with the following main goals: to inform and learn from each other, form synergies, make project results better visible and more understandable among various stakeholders, gain more attention and a wider outreach. The results of the workshop were clustered in Knowledge Transfer and Reusability, Maximising Impact and Visibility, Policy Influence and Capitalisation and Cooperation and Future Project Opportunities and the participating projects were clustered into three focus groups: circular economy, sustainable cities and regions, technology transfer and smart specialisation, and industry. The main outcomes were e.g. sharing experience and results, exchange of contacts; better visibility of the region through project results; portal of best practices and success stories (with the help of the DSP/DRP), EUSDR should facilitate stronger policy support in order to implement project results, capitalisation is important and should continue, WP capitalisation should become a part of project proposals, platform for future cooperation (matchmaking platform to develop new projects). Ms Szudi presented also other PA7 activities related to capitalization, i.e. 1) Stakeholders Event organized by the SMF project ForeDanube (led by University of Maribor) focused on foresight of Danube Region's future-oriented competitive planning; 2) Networking online event for PACs and SMF projects organized by DRP, where more personal contacts and cooperations were established (all projects were presented within WG HEM), 3) PA7 starts a closer cooperation with COST Action - Science in Diplomacy Network: implementing multilateral policymaking in intersectoral cross disciplinary & strategic domains (approved among new COST actions in May 2025). (.ppt is available).

PA7 Analyses

Mr Daniel Straka (analyst, PA7) presented the results on the participation of the Danube countries in Horizon Europe and other aspects influencing research and innovation excellence. At first participants got familiar with the European Innovation Scoreboard - Summary Innovation Index (comparison between 2017-2024). Mr Straka mentioned that based on the results the Danube Region countries can be divided into 4 groups: 1) AT and DE (only two above the EU average), 2) SI and CZ, 3) HU, HR, SK and RS, 4) ME, RO, BG, UA, MD. As for the progress in innovation index achieved between 2017-2024, the highest progress was achieved by the CZ followed by HR. In contrary very small progress was achieved in MD, RO and SK. Similarly, Mr Straka presented the growth in investment in R&D (2017-2024) pointing out that both DE EUSDR regions (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), as for the country level only AT and DE invest above 3% and SI over 2% of their GDP to R&D. As for the capacities and talents measured by the new doctorate graduates in STEM (25-34 years), we can again see progress by AT and DE. The data were taken from the Eurostat database, so unfortunately not all countries could be compared. From the chart stating the numbers of researchers per 1 million inhabitants (FTE) can be seen that AT, DE, SI are the top countries with more than 5000 researchers per 1 million inhabitants, followed by HU, CZ and SK with more than 3000 researchers per 1 million inhabitants. When talking about contribution and participation of Danube Region countries in Horizon Europe we can see that the best performing countries are DE, AT, CZ, SI and

RO with more than 1000 participations in the programme. Mr Straka noted that naturally it is easier to participate in the programme for bigger countries and for the EU-member states. As for the contribution and participation data per capita, we can observe that the best country is SI, which received more than 170€ per each inhabitant and their participation is above 500 per 1 million population. Similarly, for the comparison between countries according to EU contribution and participation in Horizon Europe per researcher (FTE), SI was receiving more than 30.000 € per researcher than AT with approximately 24.000 € per researcher. A very balanced chart shows the similar success rate per proposals in Horizon Europe. As for the cooperation linkages between countries in the Danube region, we can see from the chart that the bigger the country the more cooperation link are established. The highest number of cooperations exist between AT and DE, CZ and DE, SI and DE.

Ms Pitlova asked for some specific recommendations what can we as PA7 do for a better participation in Horizon Europe or other programmes.

Mr Straka replied that answering the question is not easy. Since the overall competition is quite high, important role plays support and strategy on the national level and institutional level.

Challenges and Perspectives in Higher Education

Ms Ivanka Popovic informed participants on the selected persisting and new Challenges and Perspectives of Higher Education in the Danube Region, such as overcoming consequences of the pandemic, geopolitical tensions, the war in Ukraine, optimal utilization of AI, cybersecurity, funding cuts, expectations of FP10. According to the WB data (2021) on government expenditure on education (all levels), we can see that between the Danube Region countries we have a distribution not necessarily related to the economic strengths but rather strategic orientation of countries and to how strategies are being forced. Similarly, we could see the WB (2021) comparison of the R&D expenditures between Danube Region countries, where a majority was underperforming in this respect. Prof Popovic pointed out also the aspects of different Horizon Europe remuneration mechanisms and brain circulation which influence this data. The next part of the analysis concerns the different way of looking at the R&I potential in the Danube Region (than in the previous analysis of Mr Straka). In the first part Prof Popovic compared the number of ERC grants received in Danube Region countries, where the performance (except for DE and AT) is modest and it has to do with the general national support system which is insufficient even the human potential is there. Prof Popovic mentioned also another specific challenge of ERC grants, which is that a grantee can move his/her project anywhere in Europe and presented a case of Serbia. If we look at the overall R&I performance in the region, we can see that the potential of human capital the region has is not bad – and it shows a good scientific research potential. According to the European innovation scorecard we shall be aware – our efforts to Support DR innovation, start-ups is working, but it is slow and therefore we have some imbalance in the region. Regardless of this, the universities of DR show a very good resilience and following trends. Prof Popovic specifically mentioned the third call of the European Universities Alliances which were meant to

form mega-universities to compete with the other world players (in President Macron speech). There are 65 alliances with more than 570 higher education institutions of all types, from all across Europe. And there are several open questions, 1) what the future of the alliances will be and how this program will be funded later, 2) are the represented universities in the alliances are truly a good measure of academic progress or just a start of a two-tier academic community? Prof Popovic also noted that there are at the moment 104 Danube Region universities in the alliances (but only 1/3 are members of the DRC) and raised another issue why so many universities are forsaking the aspects of the regional engagement? At the following slides Prof Popovic raised other questions related to the role of universities in changing geopolitical circumstances causing pressures on governments and causing strategic shifts, which also concern the universities. How will the lack of maintaining European values affect the autonomy of universities? The European University Association periodically publishes a study on higher education systems, including data on organisational, financial, staffing, and academic autonomy. The data from 8 Danube region countries (SK, CZ, RS, AT, SI, HR, HU, RO) were analysed and compared between (2011-2023). According to the trends (2023) we can see a disturbing trend where the university autonomy is more challenged than it is positive. To conclude the presentation Prof Popovic mentioned that we live in a transition to new governance of societies where universities shall play roles of catalysts of change. Therefore, the national governments need to allow universities flourish in a way that would benefit societies.

Invited Lecture

Measuring the Knowledge Society: Indicators and Insights from the Danube Region

Ms Dijana Strbac (PA7 coordination team, Institute of Economic Sciences, Serbia) welcomed participants to the presentation on the knowledge society indicators offering a view on recommended activities for PA7 in the future. At the beginning different definitions of the knowledge society were introduced, summarizing the key features, such as central role of knowledge, high-quality education and lifelong learning, R&I and creativity, ICT, open access to information and transparency, interdisciplinary and collaborative approach, inclusive and participatory society, knowledge-based economy. Based on the different theoretical and policy approaches and concepts on knowledge society, Dr Strbac identified five most important pillars of knowledge society: 1) Education and Human Capital, 2) Research and innovation, 3) Digital and ICT Readiness, 4) Knowledge-Based Economy, 5) Inclusiveness and Governance and identified indicators which show performance of Danube Region in each of them. The presentation concluded with key insights and policy recommendations based on the analysis of selected knowledge society indicators (.ppt available).

Prof Nedovic thanked for a structured way of presenting the indicators, and a specific overview related to the Danube Region. Apart from this, he raised a question on a specific key recommendation for the work of PA7 and a suggestion for the newly established WG formed together in Pillar III of the EUSDR (PA7+PA8+PA9).

Dr Strbac recommended creation and preparation of new projects and initiatives in the region, which would help in multiple ways, increasing the R&D investment, improving the innovation ecosystems, skills

and accessibility to other programmes, therefore our priority areas should concentrate their efforts on creating and supporting these opportunities.

Dr Volasko, similarly, thanked for the comprehensive presentation of quantitative overview, and asked a complementary question on qualitative aspect of knowledge society, in terms of transition to wisdom society. E.g. ethics, values within the science and research innovation policies, strategies etc. – are they really oriented on what we wish to achieve? How could we improve the macroeconomic model to be sustainable, not be just catching up the other continents and having a passive role.

Dr Strbac agreed that her presentation rather captured a traditional approach, but she was aware there is a need to improve the definition of knowledge society itself. Nowadays, we shall be developing knowledge societies in the era of sustainable development goals, in the era of transformative innovation policy. Dr Strbac mentioned that in her future research she plans to focus on a new set of indicators. She also added that Prof Nedovic within work of his WG RIS3 similarly focuses on the new aspects of transformative innovation, including elements of green transition, sustainable development, etc.

Mr Roland Mayer-Frei thanked for a complex quantitative overview of the Danube Region in the past 10 years and emphasized that the role of investment into education and R&D. The other important thing is the role of universities as innovators and educators and their autonomy must be maintained. Mr Roland Mayer-Frei noted also another potential of the Danube Region countries which is a young society and mentioned the importance of the Danubius Young Science Award for the region.

Updates on PA7 flagship projects

Ms Pitlova informed participants about the process of identification and selection of Danube Flagship Projects, Initiatives and Processes and noted that after the successful Capitalisation workshop, PA7 this year had a difficult task compared to others, to choose three among so many excellent projects. She informed participants that PA7 nominated two new projects and re-nominated one of the older projects. All projects were approved per-rollam by PA7 SG members and by the DSP, and their certificated were issued with the help of the DSP.

TICCA4DANU

Mr Oliver Ziegler (IIT, Germany) greeted participants from Berlin and introduced the first nominated Danube flagship project TICCA4DANU focused on transformative innovation for climate change adaptation in the Danube Region. Mr Ziegler noted the tight links with the PA7 WG RIS3 and expressed appreciation for the nomination among flagships. The TICCA4DANU projects bring together two communities: 1) governance / smart specialisation / transformative innovation policy community and 2) climate change community and introduce new ideas and solutions at the level of cities and regions. Mr Ziegler briefly introduced the project partnership, duration (06/2025-05/2028) and financial volume (4 mil. €) and project overview and roles, with a particular focus on facilitating the knowledge transfer into neighbouring Danube countries by establishing work relations with the EUSDR. The project addresses different bio-geographical regions from the Danube Macro-Region. As for the concrete work packages, we could learn about four interlinked building blocks, i.e. targeted analysis (WP2), experimentation (WP3), engagement & capacity (WP4) and policy recommendations (WP3/WP4) working in feedback loops to ensure science-based, inclusive, and actionable climate adaptation across city-regions. TiCCA4Danu proposes a novel and comprehensive transformative innovation framework to accelerate just climate change adaptation (CCA) at the level of cities and their surrounding administrative regions. To address the structural barriers for CCA implementation at the city-region level, TiCCA4Danu proposes a systems-level approach, which requires effective governance changes, introduction of directionality, and a different use of policy instruments favouring experimentation and open discovery processes to manipulate S3 processes towards CCA. Dr Ziegler also outlined the activities related to flagship status connected mainly with maintaining a partner network in the Danube Region in a close collaboration with the WG RIS3, but also exploring possibilities to cooperate with PA5 (Protecting the Environment) or PA10 (Building Prosperity) and potentially involving them to the project activities. As for the activities of the future EUSDR Bulgarian Presidency, Dr Ziegler offered organisation of the 2nd general assembly and mid-term dissemination conference back-to-back to the EUSDR Annual Forum in Sofia, Bulgaria (fall 2026), or optionally to host a workshop on transformative innovation policy. As for the other activity on alignment with mission frameworks and EC ecosystems, Dr Ziegler mentioned the importance of connection to the missions, engagement with established platforms (with priority MIP4Adapt portal, Climate-ADAPT, Futurium, WeAdapt, New European Bauhaus, JustREACH „sister“ project, JRC, S3 CoP, Interreg Europe Platform, etc.), participation and contribution to their events, bring their experts to the EUSDR events, etc. (.ppt available).

GeoNetSee

Ms Kruna Ratkovic (University of Donja Gorica, Montenegro) introduced the GeoNetSee project and its belongs to the PA7, other PAs and the Danube Region. GeoNetSee project aims to create an integrated geosensor network and a digital platform to monitor displacements and deformations of terrain and artificial structures in the Danube region, enabling real-time data sharing and improving risk management. Further the other project objectives were presented, i.e. reducing the innovation gap (AI, GNSS, IoT uptake in risk monitoring) in the Danube region, deploying geosensor systems in 3 pilot countries (Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia & Herzegovina), establishing Danube Collaborative Center (DCC) connecting researchers, geodetic monitoring experts and policy experts. Prof Ratkovic presented also the basic project

data about the project partnership (14 project partners + 12 associate partners representing 9 Danube countries), duration (01/2024-06/2026), budget (1,7 mil. €) and project affiliation to EUSDR priority areas PA1B (enhancing safety through continuous monitoring of critical transport infrastructure), PA5 (providing real-time geohazard monitoring for disaster risk reduction), PA7 (strengthening advanced R&I infrastructure + cross-border knowledge exchange and collaboration), PA8+PA10 (fostering clustering of innovation actors and smart specialization synergies, supporting strategic multi-level governance via the DCC). Prof Ratkovic mentioned that geohazards (climate change, tectonics, and aging infrastructure, landslides and slope failures) represent a growing threat; disrupting transport, safety, tourism, economy and the environment fragmented national systems call for transnational coordination. Prof Ratkovic also presented how the GeoNetSee project helps to respond to these threads through application of cutting-edge AI/IoT technologies, real-time system of geosensors with the early warning functionality and via enabling transnational collaboration via the DCC. Furthermore, concrete innovative solutions for real-time landslide detection and terrain monitoring and predictive analytics and concrete examples were introduced. To the end participants could learn about the project expected impacts and sustainability, such as preparation of a Strategy on Reducing the Innovation Gap in the Danube Region (cross-country mapping of innovation ecosystems, identification of bottlenecks & funding paths), stronger policy alignment, providing uptakes of geodetic monitoring solutions, better cross-border response, resilience for infrastructure and citizens. (.ppt available).

HARMONMISSIONS

Mr Ondrej Zachar (SCSTI, Slovakia) presented the updates, progress and future plans within implementation of the renominated PA7 Flagship Project HARMONMISSIONS. He briefly introduced the project consortia (11 partners from 9 countries, incl. PA7 and PA10 as associated strategic partners), duration (01/2024-06/2026) and project specific objectives. Mr Zachar informed that there were 20 memorandums of understanding signed by 20 important stakeholders from 9 Danube region countries (incl. NGOs, universities, local and regional institutions, which can join the advisory groups and support project activities during its duration. Apart from this HARMONMISSIONS closely cooperates with other EU projects, i.e. NCP4MISSIONS, MountResilience and BIOEAST. Mr Zachar reminded to participants that the main objective of the project is to harmonise the implementation of the European missions on the Danube region level. As the missions are differently understood not only in our region, the project facilitates cooperation between partners and raises awareness of the missions among the professional and lay public. HARMONMISSIONS aims more concretely at creating channels between two climate oriented EU Missions, i.e. 1) Adaptation to Climate Change, and 4) 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030 via establishing governance model, transnational cooperation and interactions in the region. Mr Zachar pointed out that the cooperation among partners plays a crucial role, as the climate change cannot be tied to a specific country, there is a need of cooperation to tackle the climate change. As for the project specific objective 1 (Danube region governance model for Climate oriented EU Missions), Mr Zachar mentioned the established Steering Committee and Advisory Groups which contribute to linking relevant actors from different levels oriented towards the climate-oriented areas of the EU Missions and preparation of the Strategy for Coordination of Involvement in EU Missions in the Danube region, which will summarize the best practices

on how all these actors at different levels can be involved in climate oriented EU missions. As for the specific objective 2 (Danube region transnational cooperation for Climate oriented EU Missions) the project sets up three platforms, united under one website dedicated to EU missions in the Danube region, 1) SHARED to share lessons learned and best practices in the region on EU climate missions, to connect projects and ideas related to climate EU missions, to collect info about the relevant past and present projects dedicated to climate oriented missions; 2) EMO – European Mission Observatory platform is an operational platform for monitoring legislation, calls and events about climate EU missions, creating a space for Danube region participants to form partnerships, engage in projects, share experiences, and raise awareness, enhancing their effectiveness and impact on EU Missions, and providing the possibility to find partners and engage in projects related to EU Missions; 3) CCC – Climate City Contract platform as a functioning platform for publishing a handbooks for procedures of CCC. The third specific objective (Danube region interactions for Climate oriented EU Missions) is to raise awareness of EU Missions, to inform the widest possible audience of stakeholders by communication and dissemination campaigns, to involve citizens in the mission's implementation. Within this specific objective an Analysis of the needs was developed, and a following Training and expert events plan was prepared. From the past events, Mr Zachar mentioned e.g. an Online Workshop: EU Missions for Climate Resilience and Smart Cities (March 2025), National training in Bulgaria (April 2025), EU Missions 1 & 4 - Brokerage event and workshop in Ljubljana (June 2025), EU Missions and Project Development National Training in Romania (June 2025), Mission's Forum in cooperation with EUSDR PA7 (May 2026). To conclude the presentation, Mr Zachar formulated the main project results, which are: 1) linking international, national and regional level actors to cooperate more effectively on EU Missions calls, 2) HARMONMISSIONS online platforms, 3) Strengthening of institutional staff capacity, 4) Joint strategy for further progress. (.ppt available).

Mr Ziegler suggested linking the two projects HARMONMISSIONS and TICCA4DANU together for the future cooperation.

Western Balkans Info Hub

Ms Elke Dall (ZSI, Austria) presented the latest development within the POLICY ANSWERS / WB Info Hub project, briefly mentioning the exchanges on policy recommendations for FP10, webinar on Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3), participation at the PA7/PA8 Capitalisation Workshop, exchanges on Science Diplomacy (COST Action), presentation of Western Balkans Mobility Scheme incl. cooperation with EUSDR and DRC) at a hybrid event in Tirana (June 2025) on “Enhancing Mobility-Driven Research and Innovation in Western Balkans for Sustained Economic Growth and Convergence with the European Union”. As for the updates on WB Info Hub online platform, Ms Dall informed about the change of the system (MailChimp) and related challenges (resubscription campaign, more focus on LinkedIn with +500 subscriptions), but the information on any relevant news, events and calls announcements are published by the project team daily. There are also continuous updates of previous themes. From this year's themes were mentioned, e.g. Erasmus+ and the WB (January 2025), Smart Specialisation Strategy (February 2025), Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management (March 2025), Meetings of the Western Balkans Steering Platforms (May 2025), European Institute of Innovation and Technology (April 2025). The next Newsletter will be focused

on the research infrastructures and Ms Dall called upon sharing any related facts or news. As for the recorded webinars (66 videos are [available](#)) organized within WB Info hub their topic dealing with topics such as smart specialisation in EU enlargement countries, insights into role of high-performance computing, technology-oriented research infrastructures, capacity building results, instruments such as BIOEAST, Water4All, Raw Materials networks, etc. Ms Dall also mentioned the preparation of Ministerial meeting on 20-21 October 2025, which will include public events (by COST, JRC, ScienceBusiness). As for the monitoring of the Western Balkans Agenda, there is the 3rd ongoing round on R&I, digital competitiveness, environment, youth, culture & sports, education & skills, and common regional market. Ms Dall highlighted the Western Balkans R&I Youth (aged 15-29) Awards recognising outstanding youth-focused initiatives that have significantly managed to get youth involved in R&I between 2020 and 2024. The pitching event and ceremony took place in May in Skopje where 12 best initiatives were presented and awarded. To conclude the presentation, the forthcoming activities such as capacity building activities (e.g. BiH supporting digitalisation of libraries, Montenegro training and mentoring for Horizon proposals, Serbia training on evaluation of policies and programmes), policy briefs (on health policy, on statistics under development, on FP10 updates), pilot programmes (evaluation of the WB mobility scheme, WB Innovation Vouchers, WB Youth R&I Award + their further promotion is forthcoming), [regional innovation academy](#) launched and to be further promoted, upcoming [webinar on PRIMA](#) - Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (July 2025), work on sustainability strategy, future dedicated discussions also in cooperation with the EUSDR. From additional discussions within the WB Info Hub the topic deal around the EU Enlargement (Chapter 25 negotiations, Reform Agenda, Growth Plan, Academic Freedom), improve positions in the European Innovation Scoreboard, [increase number of registered evaluators for Horizon Europe](#) (June 2025), preparation for Horizon Europe WP2025/WP2026-27 calls (e.g. on democracy and enlargement), [Eureka LinkUp call](#) is open (deadline on 10 September 2025, info webinar in June 2025) with AT, ME, RS, SI participating, COST open call with the highest number of [successful main proposers from the WB region](#) (COST Actions open to join from 12 June), [Western Balkans-Visegrad Fellowships](#) for short-term fellowships at V4 research institutions (deadline 15 June). (.ppt available)

AoB

Mr Felix Häring (DYC member, Germany) thanked for the opportunity to take part in the PA7 SG meeting and briefly introduced the work within the DYC, mentioning that the DYC currently has 28 active members, 2 from each Danube region country appointed for 1 year, starting every year in November. Mr Häring mentioned that the members of the DYC are currently preparing to participate at the Danube Youth Camp in Vienna (June 2025) with a focus on best practice exchange.

Mr Mladen Kraljic (University of Maribor) introduced the activities of the ForeDanube DRP Seed Money facility project ran by the UoM selected under the PA8 focused on analysis of the status and needs for foresight in the Danube Region, organisation of 2 events for Danube Region stakeholders, preparation of an application to Erasmus+ cooperation in the tertiary sector to develop a study programme and application to Horizon Europe with the scope to place foresight as a research field. (.ppt is available)

Prof Veskovic informed participants about his participation on a Science Diplomacy Symposium on Transboundary Nile Water Management in October 2024 in Nairobi, where he had a chance to present the activities of the Danube microregion (priority areas, the work of the DRC) and engage the other regions (continents) with our work.

Conclusions of the meeting

Mr Viktor Nedović thanked for the organization and attendance to the 29th PA7 SG meeting and appreciated all useful inputs and ideas for the future work of PA7. On behalf of the Serbian part of the PA7 co-coordination team, Prof Nedovic invited everybody for the 30th PA7 SG meeting which shall take place in Serbia by the end of 2025.

Ms Lubica Pitlova concluded the meeting on behalf of the organizers. Ms Pitlova has summarized the learnings gained through various presentation on PA7 activities, flagship projects, results of the analyses on R&I performance of the Danube Region and higher education challenges. She thanked all participants for their contributions and support and wished everyone a nice summer.

Annex I: Agenda

29th PA7 Steering Group Meeting

6 June 2025, Bratislava, Slovakia,

Venue: The Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information, Lamačská cesta 8/A

Conference room 2nd floorRegistration link: <https://forms.gle/yUXcA7QajNnureaW6>

REGISTRATION AND WELCOME

09:00 – 09:30	Registration
09:30 – 09:45	Joint welcome and opening remarks from PACs and EC <i>Viktor NEDOVIĆ and Lubica PITLOVA, PA7 coordinators</i> <i>Nina BRATKOVA, EUSDR National Coordinator (SK)</i> <i>Elisa COCCO, EC DG REGIO</i>

PA7 UPDATE ON PAST ACTIVITIES AND FUTURE PLANS WITHIN PA7/EUSDR/beyond

09:45 – 10:00	Information on PA7 activities in the first half of 2025 <i>Dijana ŠTRBAC, Jaroslava SZUDI</i>
10:00 – 10:15	Information from the DSP – Update of the activities & the way forward <i>Cristina CUC</i>

SHORT REPORTS ON PA7 WORKING GROUPS

10:15 - 10:35	WG DFCN incl. report on Danube MSTC call	<i>Christian GOLLUBITS</i>
	• Danubius Young Scientist Award: Career Tracking	<i>Sebastian SCHAEFFER</i>
10:45 - 10:55	WG HEM	<i>Ivanka POPOVIC</i>
	• DRC Initiative Fund for PhD students	<i>Mladen KRALJIC</i>
10:55– 11:05	WG RIS3	<i>Viktor NEDOVIĆ/Dijana ŠTRBAC</i>
10:35 - 10:45	WG ERA	<i>Jaroslava SZUDI / Lubica PITLOVÁ</i>
11: 05- 11:15	Q&A	

PRESENTATION OF THE PA7 ANALYSES

- 11:15 - 11:30 **Midterm evaluation of the participation of the Danube countries in Horizon Europe**
Daniel STRAKA
- 11:30- 11:45 **Challenges and Perspectives of Higher Education in the Danube Region**
Ivanka POPOVIĆ
- 11:45 – 12:00 **Family Picture + Coffee Break**

INVITED LECTURE

- 12:00 - 12:15 **Measuring the Knowledge Society: Indicators and Insights from the Danube Region**
Dijana ŠTRBAC

PRESENTATION OF THE CANDIDATES FOR THE 2025 PA7 FLAGSHIP PROJECTS

- 12:15 - 13:00 **Introduction of the Nominated Flagship Projects**
Oliver ZIEGLER, Vladimir RAJOVIC, Kruna RATKOVIC
- 13:00 - 13:10 **Q&A**

UPDATES ON 2024 PA7 FLAGSHIP PROJECTS

- 13:10 - 13:25 **HARMONMISSIONS** *Ondrej ZACHAR*
- 13:25 - 13:40 **Western Balkans Info Hub |**
POLICY ANSWERS *Elke DALL*
- 13:40 – 13:50 **AOB**
Short information on behalf of DYC *Felix HAERING*
Short information on ForeDanube project *Mladen KRALJIC*
- 13.50 -14:00 **Conclusions of the Meeting** *Viktor NEDOVIC, Lubica PITLOVA*
- 14:00 - 15:00 **Farewell and Light Lunch**

**Annex II: List of Participants**

Surname, Name	Country Represented
<i>BANICOVA, Barbora</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>
<i>BRATKOVA, Nina</i>	<i>Slovakia (NC-team)</i>
<i>COCCO, Elisa</i>	<i>DG REGIO</i>
<i>CUC, Cristina</i>	<i>DSP, Romania</i>
<i>DALL, Elke (online)</i>	<i>POLICY ANSWERS, Austria</i>
<i>GOLLUBITS, Christian (online)</i>	<i>Austria</i>
<i>HAERING, Felix</i>	<i>DYC, Germany</i>
<i>HAGEDORN, Ralf</i>	<i>Germany</i>
<i>HNILICOVA, Veronika</i>	<i>DYC, Slovakia</i>
<i>KAŽIĆ VUJAČIĆ, Smilja</i>	<i>Montenegro</i>
<i>KOVAC, Samuel</i>	<i>Slovakia, technical support</i>
<i>KOLOCANY, Frantisek</i>	<i>Slovakia (NC team)</i>
<i>KRALJIC, Mladen</i>	<i>Slovenia</i>
<i>KUPKOVA, Darina</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>
<i>LAGATOR, Ivana</i>	<i>Montenegro</i>
<i>MAYER-FREI, Roland (online)</i>	<i>Germany</i>
<i>NEDOVIC, Viktor</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
<i>PITLOVA, Lubica</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>
<i>POPOVIC, Ivanka (online)</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
<i>RATKOVIC, Kruna</i>	<i>GeoNetSee, Montenegro</i>
<i>SHAEFFER, Sebastian (online)</i>	<i>IDM, Austria</i>
<i>STRBAC, Dijana</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
<i>SZUDI, Jaroslava</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>
<i>STRAKA, Daniel</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>



<i>TABIŠ, Tomáš</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>
<i>TEVELI, Kitti (online)</i>	<i>Hungary</i>
<i>VESKOVIC, Miroslav (online)</i>	<i>Serbia</i>
<i>VOLASKO, Peter</i>	<i>Slovenia</i>
<i>VRANOVSKA, Andrea</i>	<i>Slovakia (PA4)</i>
<i>WEISGÄRBEROVÁ, Zuzana</i>	<i>Czech Republic</i>
<i>ZACHAR, Ondrej</i>	<i>HARMONMISSIONS, Slovakia</i>
<i>ZIEGLER, Oliver (online)</i>	<i>TICCA4DANU, Germany</i>

Annex III: Selected Photos





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MINISTERSTVO
ŠKOLSTVA, VÝSKUMU,
VÝVOJA A MLÁDEŽE
SLOVENSKEJ REPUBLIKY



TiCCA4^{DANU}

TRANSFORMATIVE INNOVATION FOR CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION
IN THE DANUBE REGION

Project Pitch
EUSDR PA7 SG Meeting | 06 June 2025



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Danube Region Strategy

Midterm evaluation of the participation of the Danube countries in Horizon Europe



Daniel Straka, chief analyst
6 June 2025 in Bratislava

Autonomy Scorecard – 2023 Ranking

Country	Organisational	Financial	Staffing	Academic
Austria	9 →	22 →	16 ↑	10 ↑
Croatia	20 →	26 →	35 ↓	29 →
Czechia	30 →	11 ↑	2 →	13 ↑
Romania	30	5	14	18
Serbia	26 →	30 →	32 →	26 →
Slovakia	24 ↑	13 ↓	18 →	20 →
Slovenia	21 ↓	16 →	29 ↑	28 →

Hungary is not featured in the 2023 edition of the Autonomy Scorecard. The foundation university governance model has unique characteristics and far-reaching consequences in the different autonomy dimensions, which cannot be adequately captured by the Scorecard methodology.



Knowledge Strategy Management Committee



Pillars of the knowledge society



Education and Human Capital

Research and innovation

Digital and ICT Readiness

Knowledge-Based Economy

Inclusiveness and Governance





GeoNetSee

An AI/IoT-based system of GEOsensor NETWORKs for real-time monitoring of unStABle tErrain and artificial structures

29th PA7 Steering Group Meeting
Bratislava, Slovakia, 6th of June, 2025

Kruna Ratković

WP6 WESTERN BALKANS INFO HUB & COMMUNICATION

Western Balkans Info Hub

- News, events and calls announcements are published by the project team on a daily basis.
- We are happy to receive inputs from the community via info@westernbalkans-infohub.eu
- **Latest themes**
Meetings of the Western Balkans Steering Platforms (May 2025), European Institute of Innovation and Technology (April 2025), Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management (March 2025), Smart Specialisation Strategy (February 2025), Erasmus+ and the WB (January 2025)
- **Continuous updates of previous themes**
see e.g. <https://westernbalkans-infohub.eu/theme/macro-regional-strategies/>
- Using Mailchimp as a new tool. Resubscription campaign launched.
- Social media limited to LinkedIn, soon 5000 followers

