



Joint

EUSDR PA7 27th Steering Group Meeting

EUSDR PA 8 24th Steering Group Meeting

July 8, 2024 | IHK ULM – HAUS DER WIRTSCHAFT OLGA STRASSE 95 – 101, 89073 ULM, GERMANY

Minutes

The 27th Steering Group (SG) Meeting of Priority Area 7 (PA7) and the 24th Steering Group Meeting of PA 8 was organized on July 8, 2024, as a joint meeting and hosted by the Baden-Württemberg PA 8 partner. The Agenda of the meeting and the list of participants of the SG meeting are presented in Annexes.

Presentations from the meeting will be available at the following link: <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/steering-group-meetings/> and will be sent to PA 8 Steering Group members.

1. Official welcome on behalf of the PA7 and PA8 coordinators

The meeting was opened and moderated by **Ms. Carmen Hawkins – coordinator of the PA8 on behalf of Germany, Baden-Württemberg** (Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism). Ms Hawkins welcomed participants on behalf of both PA8 coordination team. Ms Hawkins stated, that it the aim of PA 8 to strengthen the cross-PA cooperation in the Danube Region Strategy and she is very pleased that today they were able to link the areas of knowledge society and competitiveness of enterprises.

Ms. Hawkins thanked the Chamber of Commerce-IHK in Ulm for providing the venue. Within Baden-Württemberg, the Ulm Chamber of Industry and Commerce is responsible for international cooperation and even has a Competence Centre South East Europe (KSOE) with a special focus on the countries of South East



Europe. She highlighted that the Steering group meeting is embedded into the **4th event „The Danube Region at the Turn of Times – Economic Cooperation and Hydrogen Supply Chains along the Danube“** into the **International Danube Festival** in Ulm (Baden-Württemberg) and Neu-Ulm (Bavaria).

Ms. Nirvana Kapitan Butković (Ministry of Economy, Croatia, Coordinator of PA 8 EUSDR), welcomed the Steering Group (SG) Members of both Priority areas, Working Group (WG) Coordinators and invitees, informed the participants that there was a turmoil in the Croatian Ministry due to appointment of the new government and legal succession from the former Ministry. She expressed great satisfaction with the opportunity of organizing this Joint SG meeting (24th for the PA8) together with our ‘friends’ from the PA7 and expressed hope that this kind of joint meetings would become practice.

Ms. Ľubica Pitlová welcomed the participants on behalf of the Slovak PA7 coordination team and thanked the colleagues from PA8, Carmen, Nirvana, Alexandra and others for the invitation to Ulm and for organizing this joint PA7 and PA8 SG meeting back to back to the wonderful Danube Festival. Ms Pitlova highlighted that the cooperation of PA7 with PA8 is traditionally very good and remembered the beginnings of this cooperation more than 10 years ago, when Mr Hans Peter Herdlitschka and Ms Dragica Karaic were coordinating PA8. At that time, we had several joint meetings and even managed to launch a joint project funded by Erasmus+ on Vocational Training in which Ministry of Education of Slovakia and Ministry of Economy of Baden Württemberg and other partners were involved. The outcomes of the project were very useful for the reform of the system of Dual Education in Slovakia. Ms. Ľubica Pitlová also mentioned during her welcome note that one of the biggest challenges of the Danube strategy remains the heterogeneity of the Danube region with 9 EU member states and 5 non-EU member states. Ms Pitlova noted that the gaps in research and innovation performance between Danube countries are still persisting. The majority of the Danube countries are only modest innovators. The technology transfer is still a big issue, for example also in Slovakia. On the other hand, the outcomes of research projects and appropriate higher education of young people can be very supportive to the competitiveness of enterprises. Ms Pitlova stressed that intensification of the PA7 and PA8 cooperation would be very useful for both priority areas and contributive also for the Danube Strategy as such.

PA 7 Coordinator **Prof. Dr. Viktor Nedović** also welcomed the participants of the meeting.



2. Welcome and information on behalf of the DG REGIO

Ms. Karolina Jasinska-Mühleck, representing the Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) presented the updates on the Commission Report on the Implementation of Macro-Regional Strategies and Macro-regional, which adoption is expected in early 2025, and warmly thanked all its contributors. The second topic covered information on the **5th EU Macro-Regional and Sea Basin Strategies Days 2024**, which took place in June 2024 in Brussels which was for the first time organized as a joint event of 4 MRS + 3 SBS with several new features, e.g. steering group members could be present, 20 line DGs, 'speed dating', involvement of Youth Councils, interactive thematic workshops (on innovation, clusters development and smart specialisation), etc. As the main recommendation presented by the Commissioner can be mentioned: digitalisation, enlargement, partnership and non-state actors involvement, embedding, improved governance, and visibility. Thirdly, Ms Jasinska-Mühleck introduced the Preparation for the EU Cohesion Policy post-2027. She mentioned multiple components of preparation being used from the internal analysis, as well as external contributions. Strategic agenda for the new MFF should cover foremost the topics on security, demography & migration, competitiveness, and enlargement. As for the future lessons were mentioned performance-based delivery, more flexibility, enhanced link with reforms, addressing administrative and institutional shortcomings. She also called for the strategies and their successes to be given more visibility in order to make them better and more widely known.

3. Short presentation on PA7 and PA8 action plans and activities

Ms Carmen Hawkins, Ms Nirvana Kapitan-Butkovic and Ms. Alexandra Gölz from the PA8 Coordination Team briefly presented the most relevant information on the action plan fulfillment, main events and projects related to PA8. As for the events Circular Bioeconomy Conference (September, 2023 in Zagreb), „Sharing Knowledge about ... Insect Biorefineries“ (November, 2023, online) were introduced, similarly the contribution and organisation of the current 4th edition of the ongoing event **“The Danube Region at the Turn of Times – Economic Cooperation and Hydrogen Supply Chains along the Danube”** was highlighted.



PA8 organized a conference on 21st September 2023 in Zagreb, in a hybrid form, under the topic **“Future of the Danube Region: Green Transition and Circular Bioeconomy – Enhancing the Competitiveness and Sustainability of Enterprises – Climate neutrality, Raw material supply and New business models”**. At the conference, good practices and projects from the area of circular bioeconomy were presented. It was pointed out that the Danube region is an attractive area for the development of projects in the field of circular bioeconomy.

The conference was closed by **State Secretary Hrvoje Bujanović** and **State Secretary Dr. Patrick Rapp**, both of them emphasized the importance of the Danube Strategy for the Republic of Croatia and Baden-Württemberg, good practices and joint work on projects for the development of new solutions, importance of the measures striving to encourage sustainable growth based on efficient use of resources, circular economy, clean industries and new technologies.

Also, in the framework of the newly established working group **“Circular Bioeconomy as a tool to increase the competitiveness of SMEs”** a new online event series called **“Sharing Knowledge about...”** was launched. The first event of this online series took place on November 20th, 2023 on the topic of Insect Biorefineries and AI solutions.

Ms. Carmen Hawkins informed on acknowledgement of two flagships in 2023 which were awarded the certificate: **The Danube Transfer Center (DTC) Network**, a project developed by the PA 8 Working Group on Innovation and Technology Transfer, as an outstanding example of sustainable project funding, as Steinbeis Europa Zentrum, continues to carry out targeted and successful activities. The certificate was awarded in the framework of the Annual Forum in Brdo, Slovenia, on Oct. 24, 2023.

During the Kick-off event of the Interreg Project BrAI – Bringing Artificial Intelligence towards SME on January 22, 2024, in Budapest, Hungary, the certificate was awarded to **BrAI** project supporting use of AI technologies towards SMEs, the driving forces of economy as a key to support a sustainable and resilient industry in the Danube Region.

Also, videos about these two PA 8 flagship projects were produced by the DSP, which are available on PA 8 Website and on YouTube.



Ms. Carmen Hawkins thanked SG and WG members for contribution to this meeting and the content of the event “The Danube at the turn of the Times - Economic Cooperation and Hydrogen Supply Chains along the Danube”, panel discussions and expert forums, which followed the Joint SG meeting and attracted lots of valuable participants and has a great political visibility. Also, two PA 8 Working Group Meetings took place in the frame of events on 8 July 2024, Meeting of Working Group Innovation & Technology Transfer / EcoDaLLiProject Meeting and the meeting of Working Group Digital Danube.

Ms Gölz presented that out of 9 PA8 Seed Money Facility (SMF) project applications 8 of them were successful and will be funded. The start of all projects is on September 1st, 2024. Ms Gölz gave an overview and breakdown of the total grant and the total budget of the current Seed Money Facility. She stated that PA 8 PAC Team is delighted with the huge commitment from PA 8 stakeholders and are incredibly happy about this success for PA8 with a total funding sum for PA 8 with over € 572.000. She thanked all stakeholders, lead partners, project partners and those involved. PA 8 PAC Team was involved in advertising the Funding Programme of Danube Region Programme, advising interested stakeholders and in the process of evaluation.

Ms. Nirvana Kapitan Butković presented PA8 Contribution to the 5th Report on the status of MRS to the EC, regular 6-month reporting to JS, both coordinators expressed happiness for Handover of Flagship Certificates at the end of the meeting, Contribution to connection between Interreg Projects and PA8 and Promotion of projects through DSP and PA8. Ms. Nirvana Kapitan Butković announced that 3 PA8 flagship projects have been approved for 2024 and PA8 gave presentations or speeches at Kick off meetings of these projects, which would be later on acknowledged through the ceremony of award of the certificate: DECIDE, PLAN-C and WE.Circular.

As for the future planned events, PA8 will be organizing the next SG meeting in November in Zagreb together with a thematic conference on female entrepreneurship (in cooperation with the flagship project WE.Circular), in hybrid format with 4 pannels suggested (Women in business, Circular economy as a new business model and driver of growth, development and innovation in the context of female entrepreneurship, the role of digitalisation and artificial intelligence in women's entrepreneurship, Financing possibilities and opportunities).



Ms. Carmen Hawkins informed on planning the procurement of a study in the second half of 2024, current suggested proposal of the topic is: Identifying Lighthouse projects in the Danube region. The goal of this study would be the transfer of these initiatives or cooperation with these model projects and their promotion to increase competitiveness in the Danube Region.

The final subject of the study is however not yet agreed and still open for further discussion. As for the communication activities, PA8 is actively contributing and updating the official PA8 website and twice a year prepares a regular newsletter informing stakeholders about the past and future activities.

Ms. Ľubica Pitlová similarly presented the PA7 action plan and the main achievements of PA7 in 2023 and 2024 and informed the participants about the future plans on behalf of PA7 coordination team. Ms Pitlova briefly informed about PA7 involvement in EU Macro-Regional Strategies Week (April, 2023, hybrid) within the session prepared in cooperation with PA7 flagship project DTVI entitled The contribution of the Regional Innovation Valleys to cohesive EU via funding and shared knowledge. PA7 team was actively contributing to the thematic conference organized by the Slovenian Presidency in the EUSDR „Towards Knowledge-driven Society and Professions of the Future“ (May 2023, Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia). In May last year, PA7 organized an online InfoDay “Horizon Europe Opportunities for Danube Countries” to present the possibilities for the Danube region researchers to support their participation in Horizon Europe. Ms Pitlova also mentioned regular online streamings organized to promote Danube Region scientists to a wider public. Its third edition in cooperation with PA4 took place in November 2023. The stream with Dr. rer. nat. Peter Malík, PhD. (representing Slovak State Geological Institute of Dionyz Stur) was organized in a form of a moderated discussion on the topic of karst springs. Afterwards Ms Pitlova shortly introduced all PA7 flagship projects and PA7 upcoming activities. PA7 in cooperation with PA4 and Global Water Partnership will cooperate by organizing a summer school “Drive for change” in Bratislava to support students’ and young researchers’ knowledge, skills, and competencies to fundraise projects in water management. Similarly, the next online streamed discussion is planned to take place by the end of 2024 with Prof Habersack (Austrian scientist of the Year 2024) representing BOKU Vienna and project Danube4all. The topic will be connected to the Danube River Management. Ms Pitlova noted that the next SG meeting will be organized on 15 November 2024 in cooperation with the DRC and Austrian BMBWF at the University of Krems. All PA7 SG members and other participants are welcome to join the DRC conference “University Leadership In Times of Uncertainty: Governing Universities in The Danube Region Through Multiple Crises” and the Danubius Young Scientists Award Ceremony on 14 November 2024 prior to the SG meeting. Ms Pitlova informed the participants that the Danubius Young Scientist Award is organised yearly by the BMBWF,



IDM, DRC and JRC, that it is open to all scientific disciplines and that there are 14 winners (1 per EUSDR country). PA7 will be also delivering 2 analytical studies within 2024/25: 1) Midterm evaluation of the participation of the Danube countries in Horizon Europe, 2) Challenges and Perspectives of Higher Education in the Danube Region, 3) RIS3 Development with a specific focus on strategies in non-EU countries in the Danube Region. At the end of her contribution Ms Pitlova suggested to organize a common PA7+PA8 capitalisation event focused on synergies and capitalisation of DRP and CEE projects with the aim of creating new activities, platforms, projects etc. Possible topics could concern technology transfer, RIS3, industrialisation, R&I governance etc. A pilot capitalising workshop could take place in Bratislava in autumn or winter 2024 or beginning 2025. Another possibility is to organize a common online streamed discussion with an innovator, whose activities and experience are interesting for both PAs – estimated in spring 2025.

4. and 5. Updates of current activities in PA7 and PA8

Ms. Jaroslava Szüdi (Slovak PA7 coordination team) briefly presented PA7 activities from the perspective of the new project for priority area coordinators supported by the Danube Region Programme approved for the period of 6 years (2023-2028). Ms. Szüdi mentioned the main project specific objectives and their main deliverables and updated participants on the recent achievements obtained within the project in 2024. Further the working groups operating under PA7 were briefly introduced by their leaders.

Ms Martina Hartl (Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria) on behalf of PA7 Working Group Danube Funding Coordination Network (DFCN) mentioned that the mission of DFCN is to support joint Science & Technology & Innovation activities in the Danube Region and to coordinate and synchronise national, bilateral and regional efforts in the Danube Region in order to foster multilateral collaboration in Research and Innovation. Ms Hartl mentioned that the main coordinated instrument for now seems to be the multilateral call labelled as a flagship project. There are also a number of bilateral activities ongoing through the INTERREG Programmes, but we are questioning what the role of PA7 should be. Ms Hartl also mentioned the instrument introduced already within Horizon 2020 called the Seal of Excellence. It is a quality label, which become a key instrument to create synergies. The Seal of Excellence is awarded to project proposals submitted under a Horizon Europe call for proposals and ranked above a predefined quality thresholds but were not funded by Horizon Europe due to budgetary constraints. With this label the Commission recognises the value of project proposals and encourages other funding organisations to take advantage of the high-quality Horizon Europe



evaluation process. The uptake of the Seal of Excellence in Structural Funds programmes is further promoted in the context of reinforcing synergies between the research and innovation framework programmes and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), as well as through enhancing information flow on the Seal of Excellence project proposals.

The transfer between cohesion policy funds and Horizon Europe is one of the new possibilities available in the 2021-2027 programming period in the context of synergies between EU funding sources.

Mr. Mladen Kraljić (University of Maribor) on behalf of PA7 Working Group HEM informed about the latest plan of the DRC to organize the second round of successful DRC Initiative Fund and the Foresight Programme. Mr Kraljic also mentioned the similar possibility of funding mobilities of early-career researchers through the Western Balkans Mobility Scheme. This scheme was launched in the framework of a Horizon Europe funded project entitled POLICY ANSWERS (PA7 flagship project). A total budget of the scheme is EUR 100,000 and the financial support will be maximum EUR 5,000 per project. The working group is also focused on the support of Ukrainian higher education institutions (the MSCA4Ukraine new call for 50 scholarships for displaced UA researchers opens on August 5, 2024). Under the framework of the WG HEM an analysis of scientific publications in the Danube region for 2023 focusing on collaborative papers will be prepared and circulated among SG members.

Mr. Viktor Oroszi (EUSDR National Coordinator, Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, substituting PA7 SG member) contributed with the information about the [Danube Cup](#) student competition and academic cooperation. Danube Cup is an annual International Start-up Pitch Competition for students of 10 universities from 5 countries along the Danube. Two Hungarian top universities, Corvinus University of Budapest and Budapest University of Technology and Economics, founded the competition in 2016. Danube Cup's mission is to bring start-ups to international success, while bringing together the most motivated university start-ups along the river Danube. This year's 8th edition of the Final was organized by the Johannes Kepler University in Linz. Danube Cup was the winner of the European Enterprise Promotion Award this year in Hungary in the „Investment in Entrepreneurial Skills” category. Since 2023 Danube Cup is mentored by the Budapest Chamber of Commerce.

Prof. Dr. Viktor Nedović on behalf of the PA7 WG RIS3 mentioned that since the last meeting they would need to focus more on improvement of communication and coordination activities inside the region, especially related to the preparation of RIS3 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the process is still running. In all other countries and regions the processes are finalized and the future steps are being discussed. Mr Nedović noted



that the Coordination with JRC should continue in all current activities. At the meeting of the JRC Board of Governors in June 2024, it was initiated to include the representatives of the enlargement countries in the future working group for the JRC work programme 2025-2027. In addition to JRC, PA7 Working Group RIS3 discussed a lot the UN global pilot programme SDI roadmap on SDGs (RS and UA) to develop roadmaps to reach SDGs. Mr Nedović mentioned also cooperation with other macroregions. The Slovenian Ministry on Cohesion and Regional Development invited PA7 WG RIS3 representatives to take part in the preparation of the panel focused on strengthening the cooperation among macroregions - especially interregional RIS3 cooperation. The panel should be a part of the ninth edition of the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week on 17 September 2024. To the end of WG RIS3 activities, the meeting of the steering platform on R&I taking place in Skopje, September 2024 and the Analysis on RIS3 priorities and policy recommendation should be developed by the end of the year.

Ms. Ľubica Pitlová on behalf of PA7 Working Group ERA noted that the working group does its best to integrate the Danube countries into the ERA and organize various activities to get them more involved. Regular analysis on participation of Danube Region researchers in ERA will be prepared in 2024/25 to prepare recommendations on what EUSDR could do better in the next programming period.

Ms. Carmen Hawkins and **Ms. Nirvana Kapitan-Butkovic** updated participants about the PA8 activities since the last PA8 SG meeting. PA8 has to this date 6 functioning working groups (WG): PA 8 WG Innovation and Technology Transfer; PA 8 WG Digital Danube; PA 8 WG Artificial Intelligence; PA 8 WG Cluster and Regional Development; PA 8 WG – Circular Economy and Bioeconomy; PA 8 WG Female Entrepreneurship. PA 8 coordinators informed on establishment of the **WG Circular Economy and Bioeconomy** at the Conference on bioeconomy in Zagreb in September 2023, which is an added value providing new direction to the PA8, including now circular economy. Two new coordinators of the WG Circular Economy and Bioeconomy- to support the competitiveness of enterprises have been appointed, with lots of experience in the field of circular economy (Grit Ackermann from the Chamber of Commerce, Slovenia: grit.ackermann@gzs.si and Goran Vasić, Director Bioeconomy Cluster and Independent associate for market and project development(former director), Guarantee Fund of AP Vojvodina, Email: goran.vasic@garfond.rs).

The Coordinator of the WG Cluster and Regional Development **Dr. Gerd Meier zu Köcker** (Director of the RegioClusterAgentur Baden-Württemberg) informed on the past and ongoing activities of this PA 8 WG. The plan is to take a new direction and work in the future more in the field of Sustainability of enterprises. Dr. Gerd Meier zu Köcker pointed out the importance of change of focus on how clusters can support sustainability goals and requirements, present benefits to companies within the EU and associated countries of being embedded in



European value chains. He will inform the Working Group members about the changes and announce then possibly a new title of the PA Working group.

On behalf of the WG Innovation and Technology Transfer, **Miljana Ćosic** and **Daniela Chiran** (both Europe Steinbeis Europa Zentrum) presented activities of the PA 8 WG supporting the activities of the Danube Transfer Centre (DTC) Network, which was awarded of the flagship certificate at the Annual Forum in Brdo in 2023. DTC Network includes 16 Entry points, 38 Hubs in 11 Danube Region Countries, the objective is extension to 26 Entry points. DTC Network is supporting achievement of the WG I&TT targets, with 26 approved projects, 2 Mission Ocean projects, 2 Horizon Europe projects, 3 Danube Region Program Projects, 6 proposals at the moment in evaluation process and other new submissions are planned by the end of 2024.

Dr. Claus Hoffmann, the Coordinator of the PA 8 Working Group Digital Danube provided updates of this WG, highlighted supporting digital business models, digital technologies, Quantum Computing in the process of rethinking resource cycle of companies towards circular economy and transformation of linear into circular economies

Balázs Barta, the Coordinator of the PA 8 Working Group Artificial Intelligence presented the latest activities of this WG and

Ms Ralitsa Zhekova introduced to participants updates on behalf of the PA 8 Working Group on Female Entrepreneurship.

6. Information on new PA7 and PA8 flagship project candidates

HARMONMISSION (PA7) – Ondrej Zachar, Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technological Information, Slovakia

The primary objective of the HARMONMISSIONS project is to facilitate and harmonise new forms of cooperation within the Danube Region by creating channels for collaboration between partners in the areas of Mission 1 and Mission 4. The pressing need for cooperation stems from the fact that climate change cannot be tied to a specific country. HARMONMISSIONS partners further aim at promoting active stakeholder participation in EU Mission projects, facilitating project development and increasing project success.



Activities, which are focused on strengthening cooperation among the Danube Region countries such as to enhance participation in the EU Missions, ranging from raising awareness, organising diverse events for capacity building of experts and stakeholders, engaging citizens, building networks and online platforms for development and implementation of projects focused on Mission 1 and Mission 4.

The expected results within HARMONMISSIONS 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.

The consortium consists of 11 partners from a total of nine countries in the Danube Region.

DECIDE (PA8) - Claus Hoffmann, Center for Digitalisation Region Stuttgart, Böblingen, Germany

Danube Region Programme Digital Services for Circular Economy – a Toolbox for Regional Developers & SME DECIDE

The project DECIDE is funded by Interreg Danube Region Programme and has 16 international partners from ten countries along the Danube. It intends to make the European economy greener and more digital by mid-2026. DECIDE aims to provide small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), start-ups and business developers in the Danube Region with methods and tools for developing successful business models for the circular economy. These models are crucial for achieving the goals of the European Green Deal by making sustainable products the norm, finding ways to transform resource-intensive sectors and making the circular economy usable in practice. "Our goal with the DECIDE project is to unite the two seemingly opposing poles of ecology and economy in promising business models."

DECIDE focuses on the sectors that use most resources and where the potential for circularity is high, including batteries and vehicles, packaging, textiles, plastics, ICT, construction and buildings, food, water and nutrients; ensure less waste; make circularity work for people, regions and cities. The development and implementation of CEBM meets common obstacles in the DR such as local regulations contrary to the circular concept, lack of infrastructure for waste treatment, lack of recycling technology and especially a lack of adequately planned business models. This is where the project aims to intervene by providing methods and tools to SMEs.

The DECIDE project is funded with almost three million euros until mid-2026.



PLAN C Moving Plastics and Machine Industry towards Circularity Moving Plastics (PA8) – Eva Breuer, Business Upper Austria - OÖ Wirtschaftsagentur GmbH Linz, Austria

The Plan-C project boosts the transformation of the plastics value chain in the Danube countries towards circularity through the transnational cooperation of plastics processors/producers and the machine industry.

The Plan-C project, a consortium of 14 partners from Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, and Moldova, aims to address these challenges. By fostering transnational cooperation among plastic processors, producers, and the machine industry, the project seeks to drive the transformation of the plastics value chain in the Danube Region towards circularity. Achieving this requires close collaboration to change mindsets, behaviors, and business paradigms. The goal is to enhance the competitiveness of key actors, contributing to the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Priority Area 8 objectives.

Using technology transfer and a design thinking process, the partners will co-create and demonstrate circular plastic prototypes, resulting in a Circular Plastics Guideline to build regional knowledge and capacities. Strategic partners and policy stakeholders will help integrate this strategy into regional innovation strategies (RIS3).

Similarly, project partners and machine firms will develop circular solutions for each phase of the machine lifecycle, and create digital business models summarized in a Guideline for Circularity in the Machine Industry, to be integrated into RIS3 as well.

Therefore, it is of crucial importance to support SME to proactively transform their product development, the product life cycle management and to create related business models in line with the idea of a circular economy.

It is expected that the project results will not only have an impact on the participating regions, but also on the entire partner countries and, through intense dissemination activities, also on neighbouring countries.

WE.Circular - Boosting digital and industrial capacity for sustainable circular transition of women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region (PA8) – Ralitsa Zhekova, Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Inovations, Varna, Bulgaria

The key issues addressed within WE.Circular - project are existing digital skills gap, low representation of women entrepreneurs, lack of national/regional strategies for circular economy transition in most regions, lack



of support for transnational alignment of S3 strategies and policies for Industry 4.0 transition of women entrepreneurs.

WE.Circular aims to foster economic growth and environmental sustainability, making a tangible impact on the region. Through collaborative efforts, it strives to bridge the gender gap, empower women entrepreneurs, and to drive forward the circular economy.

WE.Circular consortium gathers 15 regular and 11 associated strategic partners from 12 countries from the Danube Region and brings together national, regional, public and private organizations and universities, whose specific thematic background guarantees solid knowledge and necessary expertise by coming forward with appropriate innovative solutions.

Through collaborative efforts, the project partners strive to bridge the gender gap, empower women entrepreneurs, and propel the circular economy forward.

The main objective of the WE.Circular project is to address a very important challenge – to increase the digital and business skills of women entrepreneurs for the industry transition and to provide key stakeholders with the skills needed to develop and implement smart specialization strategies, preparing female entrepreneurs from the Danube region for the transition to Industry 4.0, while fulfilling aspects of the circular economy.

7. Presentation on activities of the Danube Strategy Point (DSP)

Ms Cristina Cuc (Pillar Officer, DSP) briefly presented the DSP support frame covering the support for EUSDR core-stakeholders, monitoring & evaluation, communication, capacity Building, youth, embedding & funding.

DSP support for core stakeholders

Ms Cuc introduced the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper, as a framework for open discussion on ideas and challenges among the EUSDR core stakeholders. The main goal of this paper is to improve coordination and cooperation in view of further enhancing the commitment to the Strategy and its effective implementation; and to support the development of the necessary administrative capacity to ensure that political commitment translates into effective implementation. The Governance Development Task Force includes open exchange on recent developments in Danube Region, Cross-thematic topics – concrete thematic cooperation needs among Priority Areas. In November 2023 the Austrian EUSDR Presidency and the DSP organised a joint online working



group meeting for the EUSDR NCs and PACs on the Governance Development. Closer coordination and communication, together with a better understanding of the concrete roles and the relationships among the stakeholders, were considered key aspects more effective cooperation and for an improved implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

Further, Ms Cuc mentioned a currently open exchange on recent developments in Danube Region Cross-thematic topics and concrete thematic cooperation needs among Priority Areas. The collection of inputs from/exchange with colleagues and identification of urgent/currents topics will follow in the forthcoming months.

Another support tool will be implemented based on the findings of the EUSDR Governance Architecture Paper revision, the EUSDR Governance Development Task Force and the stakeholder discussions under the AT EUSDR Presidency are announced teambuilding activities for the core stakeholders 2024 onsite & (for Q2-Q4 2024) and PAC/teams seminar on hybrid meetings.

Implementation Report/EC Report Overview

Ms Cuc presented two report overviews carried on within EUSDR in 2024: 1) 5th EC Report on the implementation of MRS 2024, and 2) EUSDR Implementation Report 2024. These reports offer overview of the participation, commitment and achievements within the EUSDR, they offer a basis for decision-making, support for strategic coordination, data for upcoming evaluations, enhanced grounds for more targeted stakeholder support/activities from PAs and DSP.

Evaluation

Ms Cuc noted that the EUSDR Evaluation Plan 2023-2028 was developed in close cooperation with SG DANUVAL and from the upcoming evaluations Process/Implementation Evaluation (2024/2025) and Policy Evaluation (2027/2028) were mentioned.

Danube Strategy Flagships

Ms Cuc informed that the Danube Strategy Flagships strengthen internal and external communication of the Strategy and the visibility of the topics, initiatives and prospects in the Danube Region. They illustrate the progress achieved in implementing the EUSDR and demonstrate significant improvement in the Region that is



induced by cooperation strengthening a, generating value chains or model solutions to important common challenges faced within the Danube Region. The List of Danube Strategy Flagships 2023 and the Identification of new Danube Strategy Flagships 2024 represents high importance for the Danube Region's economic, social and territorial cohesion and for improving the quality of life therein. The flagships are widely promoted via specific DSP campaigns, dissemination via newsletters and internally within units, stakeholder groups etc.

Communication

Ms Cuc mentioned that the EUSDR DSP media platforms are constantly updated. New form of videos and e-banners were produced in January 2024 to promote Flagships 2023 & relevant PAs. There is a social media campaign running promoting flagships on social media channels managed by DSP. The DSP is preparing a launch of of a new website by the end of 2024, Information & brand-awareness materials, aligned communication activities more with the EUSDR Presidencies, and a NEW platform on social media established on <https://bsky.app/profile/eusdr.bsky.social>.

Capacity Building

Ms Cuc informed participants that there is an ongoing Capacity Building Need Assessment (CBNA) in order to develop a CB framework for the EUSDR core stakeholders in respect to their roles, responsibilities and collaboration relationships:

The first phase is related to the data collection for a capacity building analysis using three methodological tools: exploratory interviews – conducted at the beginning of March 2024, focus groups – held in April 2024 and questionnaires – circulated to the stakeholders in May 2024. Based on the CBNA, five training sessions will be provided starting from 2024.

In the second phase the complete data will be analysed and a framework for improving capacity building through tailored trainings will be organized.

Danube Youth Council (DYC) and Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON)

The DYC is in the 2nd mandate period from 1 November 2023 until 31 October 2024. 25 out of 28 first-generation DYC members decided to prolong their mandate.



Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON) is planned to be established as a complementary structure to the DYC. The DYON shall be established in 2024, under the AT EUSDR presidency. First and second meetings with interested youth organisations were organized in December 2023 and in April 2024. The exact setup, scope and activities of the DYON remains yet to be defined and shall be consulted together with PACs in July 2024.

DSP also prepared an overview/calendar of the EUSDR events, which are regularly updated also on the official EUSDR webpage in the events section and in the EUSDR calendar: https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-11-10_EUSDR-Meetings-under-AT-PCY-1.xlsx

8. Information on activities of the Danube Youth Council

Ana Šabanović (RS) – PA7, Bence Bíró (HU) – PA8, Ratin Sazedul (BW) – PA8. Philip Tudor (AT) – PA8

The DYC members informed the participants about their main activities and prepared an overview on the DYC vision for the Danube Region in 2040. This topic was presented by **Ms. Ana Šabanović from the PA7**, who, on behalf of the Danube Youth Council, stated their participation in EUSDR core governance meetings, to represent the viewpoints of the young generation, contribution to the EUSDR Annual For and other events and engagement in the World Cafe', involvement in EUSDR Priority areas, joint work on specific thematic issues relevant to the Danube Region. They are involved in the work of EUSDR Priority Areas and respective EUSDR Presidencies. As a further point a joint DYC work on specific thematic issues relevant to the Danube Region for the Danube Region in 2040 was presented.

A video was displayed presenting DYC Vision for the DR in 2040. The following areas were presented in the Vision: 1) Sustainable Development including Green investments, Social integration, Internal cooperation, 2) Peace and security including: Diplomacy and dialogue, Crisis management, Supporting civil society, 3) Science, technology, innovation including: Regulatory frameworks, R&D, 4) Economy and finance including: Harmonising legal frameworks, Infrastructure investments, Public-private partnerships, 5) Youth involvement and governance including: Practical youth engagement, Institutionalising, Support youth-led initiatives.

Ratin Sazedul (BW, PA8) also highlighted the importance of the role of the DYC for EUSDR future and involvement of young people and proposed creation of a Forum of Transnational youth (all MRs). **Ms. Carmen Hawkins** expressed the pleasure to see so many young people willing to be engaged in EUSDR activities and that we should all make use of this offer.



At the end, **Ms. Carmen Hawkins** invited the participants to discussion.

Mr. **Victor Oroszi**, EUSDR NC for Hungary, representing the Hungarian PA7 Steering Group member, also a member of the Monitoring Committee of the DRP shared info on the initiative 'Danube Hub', a start-up competition of 10 universities from 5 DR countries. Even though there is no official connection with EUSDR at the moment.

Martina Hartl from the PA7 noted on how to follow-up on this cooperation.

She highlighted the significance of capitalization events, cross-PA cooperation on expert level.

Ms **Ľubica Pitlová** suggested for e.g. for PA7&PA8 PAC teams to meet once a year, starting in on-line form.

9. and 10. Closing words by secretaries of states and handover of flagship certificates

Ms. Hawkins expressed a warm welcome and honour for the PACs for the arrival and contribution of two State Secretaries:

Dr. Patrick Rapp, State Secretary, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg

Andreja Metelko-Zgombić, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Croatia

State Secretary **Dr. Patrick Rapp**, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Baden-Württemberg, and State Secretary Andreja Metelko-Zgombic, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia concluded the meeting .



The Baden-Württemberg State Secretary Dr. Patrick Rapp highlighted the growing importance of transnational cooperation, particularly in light of occasions such as the COVID-19 crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He stated, that the Danube Region Strategy serves as an excellent example of how macroregional strategies can contribute to promoting stability and cooperation in the region. State Secretary Dr. Rapp expressed his gratitude for the dedicated work of the Priority Area Coordinator Teams, the Steering Group members, the Working Group coordinators, Danube Strategy Point, Youth Council members and observers.

He welcomed the organization of the joint PA7 and PA8 SG meeting and appreciated seeing cooperation, exchange of knowledge, networking, joint efforts for boosting regional growth and development. He welcomed the presence of DG REGIO and expressed his thanks for participation. The presence of a representative of DG REGIO is a statement to the importance and influence that the macro-regional strategies

He said that it is an honor for him to award certificates to flagship projects from both PAs and thanked the project partners for valuable project development.

State Secretary Dr. Rapp was delighted to have the opportunity to meet the DYC members, stating that the youth represents the undeniable future of our society, and their involvement is a significant sign of sustainability.

Despite their ongoing studies or their work, DYC members actively dedicate themselves to the Danube Region Strategy, which deserves the highest recognition. He continued, that the engagement of DYC members were not only inspiring but also of tremendous importance for shaping a positive future. He thanked the DYC members for their valuable work and commitment and their participation at the events and meetings in Ulm.

The Croatian State Secretary Ms. Andreja Metelko-Zgombić expressed a great honor to be at the meeting on behalf of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Ministry of Economy and to close this joint Steering Group meeting of Priority Area 7 (Knowledge Society) and Priority Area 8 (Competitiveness of Enterprises).

This joint meeting is an excellent proof of cross priority area cooperation and successful collaboration within one of the pillars in the Danube Strategy and should be set as an example for further collaboration of other Priority Areas and the Republic of Croatia will continue to support macroregional strategies boosting business, investments, also in the light of the Croatian path to OECD membership, expected to join in 2026.



Croatia together with the colleagues from Baden-Württemberg will continue to work on fostering competitiveness of enterprises in the DR as one of the key areas of bilateral cooperation within national and EU level.

Ms. Andreja Metelko-Zgombić noted that such a meeting and event is a good mix of stakeholders that came up to valuable and productive outcomes. She was glad that representatives of flagship projects were present meaning that the cooperation of the projects and priority area coordinators is successful and will find the way to move forward so that project results should be disseminated, capitalized and dispersed among many different stakeholders, from project partners to policy makers. She was also very pleased to learn that the members of the Youth Council were there, as well. Croatia very strongly welcomes the empowering and inclusion of youth in the activities and objectives of the EUSDR.

Croatia actively supports the EU Macroregional Strategies, especially the EUSDR and transnational and macroregional cooperation within the framework of the EU strategy for the Danube Region is of increasing importance for Croatia, especially in the context of boosting business opportunities, funding opportunities and investments, promoting circular economy business models.

In addition, Ms. Andreja Metelko-Zgombić said that Croatia has just ended the Chairmanship of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian region in May 2024 and thus contributed to discuss possibilities and modalities to further enhance synergies, interaction and coordination in areas of common interest, enlargement process and cooperation among EU & non-EU Member States.

She concluded with congratulations to the State Secretary Dr. Rapp and his team for organizing both this Steering Group meeting but the whole event, as well. Successful conclusions of this meeting will only be a good introduction to all the interesting panels and discussion that took place during this day.

At the end of the meeting the Flagship Certificates were awarded to the Lead Partners of the Project.

The certificates were awarded to:

Dr. Claus Hoffmann, Center for Digitization Region Stuttgart – Lead Partner of the project **DECIDE** – Digital Services for the Circular Economy – a Toolbox for Regional Developers & SME



DECIDE | DECIDE – Digital Services for the Circular Economy – a Toolbox for Regional Developers & SME (interreg-danube.eu)

Ms. Eva Breuer, Business Upper Austria – Lead Partner of the project **PLAN C – Moving Plastics and mACHine iNdustry towards Circularity**

Plan-C | Plan-C (interreg-danube.eu)

Ms. Ralitsa Zhekova, Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovations – RAPIV – Lead Partner of the project **WE.Circular – Boosting digital and industrial capacity for sustainable circular transition of women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region**

WE.Circular | WE.Circular (interreg-danube.eu)

Ondrej Zachar - Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information (SCSTI) - **HARMONMISSIONS**

<https://interreg-danube.eu/projects/harmonmissions>

Ms. Martina Hartl - Ministry of Education, Science and Research in Austria - **MULTILATERAL SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL COOPERATION**

MSTC - <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/flagship-projects/mstc/>

Ms. Dijana Štrbac and **Ms. Jaroslava Szüdi** - PAC7 team members – **POLICY ANSWERS** (Western Balkans Info Hub)

Policy Answers - <https://knowledgesociety.danube-region.eu/flagship-projects/policyanswers/>



Ms. **Carmen Hawkins** thanked all participants for contributions, looking forward to future dialogue and partnerships.



Annex I: Agenda

JOINT STEERING GROUP MEETING PRIORITY AREA 7 AND 8 OF THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION (PA7 AND PA8 EUSDR)

(27TH PA7 STEERING GROUP MEETING
24TH PA 8 STEERING GROUP MEETING)

AGENDA

DATE: MONDAY, JULY 8TH, 2024 – 11:00 A.M. TO 01:00 P.M.

WHERE: IHK ULM – HAUS DER WIRTSCHAFT
OLGASTRAßE 95 – 101, 89073 ULM, GERMANY
SIEGFRIED WEISHAUPH HALL (7TH FLOOR)

11:00 am	<p>1 .Opening of the Meeting</p> <p>Carmen Hawkins, Coordinator of PA8 of the EUSDR- Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg</p> <p>Nirvana Kapitan Butković, Coordinator of PA8 of the EUSDR - Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, Croatia</p> <p>Lubica Pitlova, Coordinator of PA7 of the EUSDR – Slovak Center of Scientific and Technological Information, Slovakia</p> <p>Viktor Nedović, Coordinator of PA7 of the EUSDR - University of Belgrade, Serbia</p> <p>10 min</p>
11:10 am	<p>2. Welcome and Information by DG Regio</p> <p>Karolina Jasinska-Mühleck, Policy Coordinator – Programme Manager European Commission Directorate General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO)</p> <p>10 min</p>
11:20 am	<p>3. Short presentation of the PA8 Action Plan and activities,</p> <p>Carmen Hawkins and Nirvana Kapitan Butković</p> <p>10 min</p> <p>A short presentation of the PA7 Action Plan and activities, including proposal for joint PA7/PA8 actions</p> <p>Lubica Pitlova and Viktor Nedović</p> <p>10 min</p>

11:40 am	<p>4. Updates of PA7 activities since the last SG meeting including WG activities Jaroslava Szudi and Dijana Štrbac</p> <p><i>15 minutes including discussion and contributions</i></p>
11:55 am	<p>5. Updates of PA8 activities since the last SG meeting including WG activities Carmen Hawkins and Nirvana Kapitan Butković</p> <p><i>15 minutes including discussion and contributions</i></p>
12:10 pm	<p>6. Information on new PA 7 and PA 8 flagship projects candidates</p> <p>HARMONMISSION (PA7)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Harmonize the implementation of the European missions on the Danube region level (tbc) Ondrej Zachar, <i>Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technological Information, Slovakia</i> (5 min) <p>DECIDE (PA8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing methods and tools for developing Circular Economy Business Models Claus Hoffmann, <i>Center for Digitalisation Region Stuttgart, Böblingen, Germany</i> (5 min) <p>PLAN C (PA8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moving Plastics and Machine Industry towards Circularity Moving Plastics and Machine Industry towards Circularity Eva Breuer, <i>Business Upper Austria – OÖ Wirtschaftsagentur GmbH, Linz, Austria</i> (5 min)

	<p>WE.Circular (PA8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boosting digital and industrial capacity for sustainable circular transition of women entrepreneurs Ralitsa Zhekova, Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovations, Varna, Bulgaria (5 min)
12:30 pm	<p>7. Presentation on the Activities of Danube Strategy Point</p> <p>Cristina Cuc, Pillar Officer, Danube Strategy Point</p> <p>5 min</p>
12:35 pm	<p>8. Information on activities of Youth Council Members</p> <p>Ana Šabanović (RS) – PA 7, Ratın Sazedul (BW), Bence Bíró (HU), Philip Tudor (A) – PA 8</p> <p>10 min</p>
12:45 pm	<p>9. Closing words</p> <p>Dr. Patrick Rapp, State Secretary, Ministry of Economy, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg</p>

	<p><i>Andreja Metelko-Zgombić</i>, State Secretary, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Croatia</p> <p>10 min</p>
	<p>10. Handover of the EUSDR Flagship Certificates to DECIDE, PLAN C and WE Circular</p> <p><i>Dr. Patrick Rapp, Andreja Metelko-Zgombić, Carmen Hawkins, Nirvana Kapitan Butković, Cristina Cuc</i></p> <p>5 min including photos</p>
01:00 pm	End of Steering Group Meeting

Annex II: List of Participants

PARTICIPANTS

JOINT STEERING GROUP MEETING

PRIORITY AREA 7 AND 8 OF THE EU STRATEGY

FOR THE DANUBE REGION (PA7 AND 8 EUSDR)

	Name	Surname	Function	Institution /country
1	Antonia	Antonova	Observer	Sofia University, Bulgaria, Member of PA 8 Working Group Digital Danube
2	Balazs	Barta	PA 8, Coordinator Working Group Artificial Intelligence	Pannon Business Network, Hungary
3	Bence	Bíró	Danube Youth Council Member	Ministry for Energy, Hungary /Slovakia

4	Eva	Breuer	Project Manager	Business Upper Austria – OÖ Wirtschaftsagentur GmbH, Linz, Austria
5	Daniela	Chiran	PA 8, Coordinator Working Group Innovation and Technology Transfer	Steinbeis Europa Zentrum, Baden-Württemberg
6	Miljana	Cosic	PA 8, Coordinator Working Group Innovation and Technology Transfer	Steinbeis Europa Zentrum, Baden-Württemberg
7	Cristina	Cuc	Pillar Officer	Danube Strategy Point, Romania
8	Daniel	Cosnita	PA 8, Observer	President, Clustero, Romania
9	Henrietta	Czellár	PA 8 Steering Group member	Ministry of Public Administration and Spatial Development, International and Cluster Division, Hungary
10	Alexandra	Gölz	Administrative Project Lead PA 8, PAC Team	Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg
11	Dr. Ralf	Hagedorn		DLR Projektträger European Countries: Bilateral and regional Cooperation

12	Martina	Hartl	EUSDR PA 7 Steering Group member	Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth
13	Carmen	Hawkins	EUSDR PA8 Coordinator	Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg
14	Claus	Dr. Hoffmann	PA 8, Coordinator Working Group Digital Danube	Center for Digitisation Region Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg
15	Karolina	Jasinska-Mühleck	Policy Coordinator Programme Manager	European Commission, DG REGIO
16	Nirvana	Kapitan-Butković	EUSDR PA8 Coordinator	Ministry of Economy, Croatia
17	Mladen	Kraljić	EUSDR PA 8 SG Observer, EUSDR PA 7 Steering Group member	University of Maribor, Slovenia
18	Helia	Kovačević Grčić	EUSDR PA 8 PAC Team	Ministry of Economy, Croatia
19	Roland	Mayer-Frei	EUSDR PA 7 Steering Group member	Ministry of Science, Research and Art Baden-Württemberg

20	Dr. Gerd	Meier zu Köcker	PA 8, Coordinator of Working Group Cluster and Regional Development	RegioClusterAgentur Baden-Württemberg
21	Andreja	Metelko-Zgombić	State Secretary	Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Croatia
22	Andra	NEACȘU	EUSDR PA 8 Steering Group member	Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, Romania
23	Viktor	Nedović	EUSDR PA 7 Coordinator	University of Belgrade, Serbia
24	Viktor	Oroszi	EUSDR NC Hungary, representing PA7 Steering Group member	Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
25	Lubica	Pitlova	EUSDR PA 7 Coordinator	Slovak Center of Scientific and Technological Information
26	Patrick	Dr. Rapp	State Secretary	Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg
27	Ana	Šabanović	Danube Youth Council Member	Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade Serbia

28	Ratin	Sazedul	Danube Youth Council Member	University of Heidelberg, Germany
29	Amelie	Schäfer	EUSDR PA 8 Intern	Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg
30	Sylvia	Stehle	EUSDR PA 8 Assistant	Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg
31	Dijana	Štrbac	EUSDR PA 7 PAC Team	Institute of Economic Sciences Belgrade, Department for Innovation Economics, Serbia
32	Anita	Szabó	PA 8 Steering Group member	Ministry of Public Administration and Spatial Development, International and Cluster Division, Hungary
33	Jaroslava	Szüdi	EUSDR PA 7 PAC Team	Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic
34	Philip	Tudor	Danube Youth Council Member	Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria
35	Tamara	Besedniak Valić	Observer	Faculty of Information Studies, Slovenia
36	Ralitsa	Zehkova	Coordinator of EUSDR PA 8 Working Group	Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovations Varna (RAPIV),



			Female Entrepreneurship	Bulgaria
37	Ondrej	Zachar	Coordinator of the project HARMONMISSION	Slovak Center of Scientific and Technological Information, Slovakia



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Annex III: Selected Photos







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the European Union





Danube Youth Council Members Bence Bíró, Ratin Sazedul, Philip Tudor, Ana Šabanović

Source: Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg, Germany