



EUSDR PA7 28th Steering Group Meeting

15 November 2024, Krems, Austria | University for Continuing Education + ONLINE

Minutes

The 28th Steering Group (SG) Meeting of Priority Area 7 (PA7) was organized on 15 November 2024, 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/steering-group-meetings/>

Official welcome on behalf of the PACs and DG REGIO

The meeting was opened by **Ms Lubica Pitlova** (Slovak PA7 co-coordinator) who welcomed both onsite and online participants. She expressed gratitude to the Austrian EUSDR Presidency for their support in organizing the meeting and to the Serbian PA7 team for their contributions. Ms Pitlova remarked on the opportunity to attend the DRC conference the previous day, highlighting the key message: in times of uncertainty caused by wars, pandemics, and climate change, cooperation in the Danube Region is essential. She emphasized the importance of advocating for the next programming period, post-2027, particularly concerning the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and Erasmus+.

Mr Viktor Nedovic (Serbian PA7 co-coordinator) also welcomed participants, extending special thanks to the Austrian Presidency, the Austrian Ministry for Science and Research and the University for Continuing Education Krems for facilitating the meeting alongside the DRC annual conference. He noted PA7's efforts to engage all Danube Region countries and relevant stakeholders to their full capacity, which is often not fully realized. He expressed sincere hope for a fruitful discussion and, most importantly, tangible results.

Mr Johan Magnusson (EC DG REGIO) welcomed all participants and conveyed his support for PA7 activities and initiatives. He underscored the importance of involvement in the preparation of the new programming period, not only for Interreg programmes but also for specific programmes in the fields of research, innovation and education.



Information on PA7 activities in the second half of 2023

Ms Dijana Štrbac (Serbian PA7 coordination team) presented PA7 activities from the perspective of the new project for priority area coordinators supported by the Danube Region Programme. The project, approved for the period 2023–2028, involves the same partners as the previous project: the Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information and the University of Belgrade. Ms Štrbac briefly informed about the main specific objectives of the project and the changes in comparison with the previous project. She then presented the key activities undertaken in the second half of 2024, focusing on the new specific objectives (ppt available).

Ms Martina Hartl (Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria) commented on her positive experience at the joint PA7 and PA8 Steering Group meeting held in Ulm in July 2024, noting the participation of many projects. She mentioned that Austria currently lacks a representative in PA8 but anticipated this would soon be addressed, given the strong correlation between PA7 and PA8. Regarding the PA7 online streams, she suggested making future editions more accessible to individuals who are not specialists in the field.

Ms Lubica Pitlova agreed, emphasizing the importance of stronger collaboration between PA7 and PA8.

Information from the Presidency

Ms Martina Hartl informed the participants that Austria began its EUSDR Presidency in November 2023 under the slogan, "Shaping Transformation, Creating Opportunities: A Prosperous, Resilient, and Secure Danube Region." The presidency focused on three thematic priorities:

- 1) Contributing to Stability and Security, and a clear European Perspective for the whole Danube Region – this included activities targeting the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova.
- 2) Fostering Innovation, Skills and Business Opportunities in the Danube Region – several events were organized to address these topics.
- 3) Enhancing the Danube Region Ecosystem, Water and Green Transition Management – Activities included a meeting of the transport ministers in the Danube Region in April 2024 and Austria's Participation Day, which focused on climate change and water management.

From a governance perspective, the Presidency pursued several objectives: Strengthening political commitment and broad ownership of EUSDR; Continuing joint efforts to enable tangible funding opportunities; Illustrating the clear added value of EUSDR at local, regional, national and European levels and ensure visibility.



The 13th edition of the EUSDR Annual Forum was held in Vienna on June 20–21, 2024. The two-day event provided a cooperation platform for stakeholders from the region and beyond, reflecting the thematic priorities: stability and security, fostering innovation and skills, business opportunities, and enhancing the ecosystem, water and green transition management in the Danube Region.

The Austrian Presidency also created a flyer illustrating the added value of the Danube Region, available for download at: https://danube-region.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/AddedValue_Map.pdf. The flyer highlights cooperation in various areas (ppt available).

Ms Lubica Pitlova commended the Austrian Presidency for its active approach and expressed hope that future presidencies would continue with similar enthusiasm and dedication.

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

Ms Cristina Cuc (Danube Strategy Point) explained that the DSP is focused on the activities of: Support for EUSDR core-stakeholders, Embedding & Funding, Monitoring & Evaluation, Communication, Capacity Building and Youth. In the area of Embedding and Funding, a guidance paper on embedding the EUSDR into EU programmes was recently published. It includes insights from the strategic implementation process, further development and utilization of the embedding process, the current state of play, and recommendations for the future.

In terms of Monitoring and Reporting, the DSP is tracking the progress and achievements of the priority areas, including responses to questions from the European Commission. The EUSDR Implementation Report 2022-2023 is scheduled for publication in December 2024. Additionally, a process evaluation of the EUSDR was conducted this year with the support of an external consultant, and the final report is expected in spring 2025.

The Danube Strategy Flagships demonstrate tangible results achieved by the priority areas. Newly developed flagships have been published on the EUSDR website, and their promotion on social media has commenced. In terms of communication, the number of EUSDR followers on social media continues to grow. There are plans to create a more user-friendly website with new features, which is expected to go live in March 2025. For Capacity Building, a needs assessment was conducted in 2024. As a result, five training sessions are planned, with the first sessions to be organized in 2025.

Regarding Youth Engagement, 18 experienced Danube Youth Council (DYC) members will remain for another year, while approximately 10 new members will be appointed. Additionally, the Danube Youth Organisations Network (DYON) was established this year under the coordination of the Austrian EUSDR PCY to expand outreach to young people. Currently, 48 organizations have joined, and discussions about future collaboration are ongoing (ppt available).



Ms Daniela Chiran (PA8 WG Innovation and Technology Transfer) inquired about the scheduling of the next EUSDR Annual Forum in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She emphasized the need to confirm the dates soon to align with operational projects and potentially organize cross-fertilization events and project meetings.

Ms Cristina Cuc responded that discussions indicate the forum will likely take place in late October or early November 2025. The exact dates will be known during the NC-PAC meeting in December 2024.

Ms Daniela Chiran also noted the circulation of the new Horizon Europe work programme, highlighting interesting calls for participants from the Danube Region, particularly under WIDERA and Cluster 5. She suggested organizing a cross-fertilization meeting to explore these opportunities further.

Reports of the PA7 working groups

WG DFCN

Ms Martina Hartl reported on the progress of the Danube Region Programme 2021-2027, noting that two calls have already taken place. The first call saw the participation of 831 organizations, with Slovenia and Hungary having the majority of lead partners. Interestingly, in most participating countries, over half of the project partners are new to the programme. She stressed the importance of making the voices of the Danube region heard in shaping the framework programmes.

Currently, the region has contributed three position papers (Slovenia, Slovakia, and Germany), a joint statement from 15 countries on the Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence component in the next EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (R&I), and a specific policy brief titled The Western Balkans on the Road to FP10. She also noted the expected establishment of a new European Commission and a Competitiveness Fund, although it remains uncertain whether FP10 will be part of this initiative. Discussions are ongoing regarding the policy orientation of research under FP10. She concluded by highlighting the lack of progress in coordinating funding in the region and suggested conducting a survey early next year to explore potential coordination opportunities beyond existing calls (ppt available).

Mr Peter Volasko commented on structural issues within the EU, pointing out the absence of complementary programmes to the Framework Programmes. While FP is an R&I-focused initiative, there are no corresponding industrial programmes. Furthermore, he noted that R&I funds have been constrained in recent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Establishing a Competitiveness Fund, with FP10 as only a part, could exacerbate existing challenges, particularly for basic research, which often bears the brunt of such changes. He warned that macro-regions like the Danube region might be disproportionately affected, calling for improved coordination in this area.

Ms Martina Hartl agreed, acknowledging widespread concerns among researchers that increasing the competitiveness focus might reduce funding for collaborative projects. She announced that Austria would publish its position paper on FP10 once the new government is formed.



WG ERA

Ms Lubica Pitlova provided an update on the past activities of the Working Group (WG) and outlined preparations for upcoming initiatives. Planned activities include: Midterm evaluation of the participation of the Danube countries in Horizon Europe; Danube Youth Leadership Roundtable on 26-27 Nov 2024; Capitalisation workshop of the projects representing PA7 and PA8; Ongoing discussions about the preparation of a position of PA7 to the FP10.

She emphasized that the primary goal of the capitalization workshop, organized jointly with PA8, is to establish connections between strategic and project levels. The workshop aims to create synergies between projects relevant to both PAs, support new initiatives, platforms, and projects, and enhance research, innovation, and technology transfer in the Danube Region. Proposed thematic groups for the workshop include Circular Economy, Technology Transfer, Sustainable Cities and Regions, Smart Specialization, and Industry 4.0.

Ms. Pitlova also raised the question of whether PA7 should prepare a position paper for FP10. The objectives of such a paper would be to increase the visibility of the Strategy and MRS and regional cooperation as such and stress the importance of R&I and the need to increase investment in R&D&I in some Danube region countries.

Ms Martina Hartl expressed support for preparing the position paper, noting that a concise document specific to the Danube Region would be particularly impactful. She suggested embedding the region's unique challenges and ensuring the paper is finalized early next year, as it would still be timely.

WG HEI

Ms Ivanka Popović (University of Belgrade) highlighted funding and university autonomy as the most critical issues. She noted that university autonomy will be included in the position paper being prepared by this WG, which is collaborating closely with the DRC. She announced that the second edition of the DRC Initiative Fund for early-career researchers is under preparation, with a total budget of EUR 50,000. Additionally, 31 applications were received for the new Western Balkan Mobility Scheme for young researchers, which has a total budget of EUR 100,000. Each selected project will receive a grant of up to EUR 5,000, supporting research visits lasting from two weeks to six months. The WG continues to support Ukrainian higher education institutions, and a DRC delegation recently visited Uzhhorod. The MSCA4Ukraine initiative has provided 50 new scholarships for displaced Ukrainian researchers. The DRC also organizes an annual summer school, and PA7 representation is planned for 2025. Ms Popović shared data on R&D expenditures, educational expenditures, and co-publications in the Danube Region (ppt available).

Ms Martina Hartl observed from the data presented that 50% of all Austrian publications involve international collaboration, emphasizing the importance of such cooperation, particularly for smaller



countries. Ms Popović agreed, adding that international collaboration is especially relevant for countries with limited research infrastructure. She suggested that a more detailed analysis across scientific disciplines is needed.

Mr Johan Magnusson commented that the presentation provided an excellent overview of the region's situation. He noted from Eurostat data that R&D expenditures in developed Danube Region countries were marginally lower in 2022 compared to 2021, expressing hope that future data will show an upward trend.

Ms Ivanka Popovic suggested that the observed decrease could be related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and more data from 2023 and 2024 will be necessary to determine whether this represents a trend or an anomaly.

Ms Lubica Pitlova mentioned that the Multilateral Call initiated by PA7 will contribute to increasing co-publications in the region.

Mr Viktor Nedovic expressed anticipation for the co-patenting data that Ms Popović is preparing for the position paper. He also shared insights from his recent meetings in Chişinău, Moldova, with the Minister of Education and Science. Moldova is making significant progress in R&D, and discussions about future investments and potential modalities for further collaboration were held. Next week, the Serbian Ministry of Science will host a delegation from Moldova's Ministry of Education and Science.

WG RIS3

Ms Viktor Nedović provided updates on recent events and ongoing activities:

- 1) Event in Izola, Slovenia (September 17)- The event, part of the Mediterranean Coast and Macro-Regional Strategies Week, included a panel discussion with representatives from various Macro-Regional Strategies (MRSs). The discussion focused on the design and implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) in different regions and explored opportunities for future synergies.
- 2) Steering Platform on R&I in Skopje (October 1) - A high-level discussion on smart specialisation strategies in the Western Balkans was a key part of the platform's agenda.
- 3) JRC Board of Governors - At the JRC Board of Governors, a dedicated working group was established for the upcoming programming period. This group reviewed and commented on documents prepared by experts and JRC staff. Specific activities related to S3 were discussed at the Board meeting on November 7.
- 4) Study on Synergies for Research Collaboration - The Working Group is developing a study titled "Synergies for Research Collaboration in the Danube Region: A Smart Specialisation Approach." The study, expected to be completed by the end of the year, aims to: analyze the structure and dynamics of existing research networks in the Danube Region and examine changes in network structures over consecutive periods to understand the evolving roles of countries within the region (ppt available).



Ms Martina Hartl raised a question regarding the prominence of the RIS3 concept in strategy documents for the new programming period, mentioning the Draghi Report as an example. She inquired whether RIS3 remains a significant focus in these documents.

Ms Viktor Nedović responded that while RIS3 is less prominent in some recent strategic documents, the concept remains relevant. He emphasized its vitality as a methodology and its alignment with a bottom-up approach.

Danube Cup network

Mr Pal Danyi (Budapest University of Technology and Economics) presented the Danube Cup, an international network of universities along the Danube that aims to enhance entrepreneurship education and research while supporting student startups. It was established eight years ago, the competition has involved over 100 startup teams, with 11 partner universities. The network operates through a bottom-up approach and is structured around three main pillars: pitch competitions, conferences, and governance. To date, the network has organized three pitch competitions and two conferences. In 2023 DC BOARD was established, consisting two representatives of each university. The Danube Cup is beneficial for university students, professors, entrepreneurial centers, and technology transfer offices (TTOs). It supports the development of entrepreneurial universities and aligns closely with the actions of Priority Area 7. The network's strategy focuses on expansion, sustainability, joint courses, and ultimately, the establishment of entrepreneurial universities (ppt available).

Ms Martina Hartl inquired whether European universities include entrepreneurial education in their agendas. **Mr Pal Danyi** explained that universities prioritize practical, lightweight, and non-bureaucratic collaborations, which is where the Danube Cup plays a crucial role.

Mr Peter Volasko asked whether the network addresses the broader innovation ecosystem or focuses solely on early entrepreneurial initiatives. **Mr Pal Danyi** clarified that while the primary focus is on the university ecosystem for entrepreneurship, these efforts often intersect with city ecosystems. For example, the Vienna competition was linked to Vienna's Entrepreneurship Days. Also, **Mr Volasko** also asked whether students are taught about scaling up and accessing venture capital. **Mr Danyi** noted that successful investors often serve as jury members during competitions. He also mentioned that the current annual budget is approximately €40,000, with efforts underway to secure additional funding. **Mr Volasko** suggested that a Teaming Project could significantly benefit this initiative.

Mr Viktor Nedović asked whether the network has developed guidance materials for students that have ideas with high commercialisation potential. **Mr Pal Danyi** responded that Hungary offers a Booster Program that includes promotional materials emphasizing the importance of thinking regionally. Additionally, entrepreneurship classes are available to hundreds of students at the bachelor's level in many partner universities, which also host entrepreneurship centers.



Updates on PA7 flagship projects

HARMONMISSIONS

Mr Ondrej Zachar explained that main objective of the project is to harmonise the implementation of the European missions on the level of the Danube region. It is focused on two main areas: climate changes and climate neutral and smart cities. The interest of the project is to create channels for cooperation between partners in the areas of Missions 1 and 4. This will be done by establishing governance model, transnational cooperation and interactions in the region.

The project has established Steering Committee and Advisory Groups which will contribute to linking relevant actors from different levels oriented towards the climate-oriented areas of the EU Missions. So far, two meeting of the Advisory groups were organised and they started to work on “Strategy for Coordination of Involvement EU Missions in the Danube region”. Under the second specific objective, the project will set up three platforms, united under one website dedicated to EU missions in the Danube region, to share best practices in the region on EU climate missions. The third specific objective of the project 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 Missions implementation. The Missions Forum will be organised in 2026 in cooperation with PA7. The main project results will be: Linking international, national and regional level actors to cooperate more effectively on EU Missions calls; HARMONMISSIONS online platforms; Strengthening of institutional staff capacity; Joint strategy for further progress (ppt available).

Western Balkans Info Hub

Ms Elke Dall (ZSI) introduced the WB Info Hub as an online platform that offers a wide range of activities, news, event updates, and calls for applications. Established in 2006, the initiative is currently supported by the Horizon Europe project, POLICY ANSWERS. Ms Dall noted that they are undergoing a necessary update to their mailing lists due to changes in regulations and the obsolescence of certain tools. Despite these challenges, the Macro-Regional Strategies newsletter was recently distributed to 11,000 contacts from the old mailing list. She emphasized the importance of their ongoing subscription campaign to attract both new and returning subscribers, urging stakeholders to support this effort.

Highlighting the structure of their newsletters, Ms Dall explained that each issue focuses on a specific theme. For instance, the team is currently preparing a newsletter on innovation in sports, with plans for future editions dedicated to topics such as Erasmus+ and smart specialisation strategies. She suggested entrepreneurship as a potential topic based on today’s discussions.

She also provided an update on recent activities undertaken by POLICY ANSWERS. These include organizing a ministerial meeting centered on education, research and innovation (R&I), and culture, as well as hosting a strategic foresight workshop that developed a trend card methodology. The initiative has produced several key outputs, such as the policy brief “The Road towards Framework Programme 10 from



the Perspective of the Western Balkans", monitoring tools for the Western Balkans agenda, reports on ERA integration, and policy analyses on digital transformation and the green transition. In addition, the project has been conducting monthly webinars, regional pilot activities, and capacity-building actions to address identified needs. Ms Dall emphasized the importance of promoting these project results and actively engaging stakeholders as POLICY ANSWERS progresses toward its conclusion in February 2026. She also stressed the need to begin discussions on sustainability plans for the initiative's outcomes (ppt available).

Mr Viktor Oroszi (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Hungarian EUSDR NC, shared updates relevant to the WB Info Hub newsletter. He mentioned that EUSDR PA5 is organizing a meeting in Belgrade on November 27-28 to explore cooperation opportunities with flood and disaster management experts. A similar meeting is planned for Bosnia and Herzegovina next year, which could also be highlighted in future newsletters.

Mr Viktor Nedović suggested strengthening collaboration with the WB Info Hub beyond the newsletters. He proposed closer cooperation, particularly in organizing webinars, to further amplify the initiative's outreach and impact.

Danube Multilateral Call

Ms Martina Hartl outlined the primary objectives of the call, which include strengthening cross-border research cooperation, contributing to research capacity development in the region, creating opportunities for young and female researchers to collaborate in an international setting and advance their scientific careers, and facilitating joint participation in European research projects. The call is open to all scientific disciplines and thematic areas, providing funding for visits and exchanges among scientists engaged in joint research. The projects supported under this call can have a maximum duration of two years and must involve collaborative research jointly developed and completed by researchers from at least three participating countries. Currently, eight countries are participating, reflecting a gradual but steady expansion of cooperation and partnerships. The call for the 2024/2025 funding cycle opened on November 11, with a deadline set for January 17. Funding decisions will be announced in June 2025. Approximately 50 projects will be funded, with a combined budget of around 1 million euros (ppt available).

Q&A

Mr Viktor Oroszi inquired about the Danube EUREKA Call, which was announced several years ago, and asked whether the Danube Multilateral Call serves as a replacement for it or is a parallel initiative. He also questioned whether there will be another EUREKA Danube Call in the future.

Ms Martina Hartl clarified that EUREKA operates under a completely different funding scheme, targeting SMEs collaborating with research institutions. The call is managed at the EU level by respective



organizations. In contrast, the multilateral call builds on existing bilateral collaborations between countries and extends them to multilateral partnerships.

Ms Lubica Pitlova added that there are currently no plans for a future Danube EUREKA Call.

Conclusions of the meeting

Ms Lubica Pitlova noted the wide range of activities happening across the Danube region and expressed hope for even more initiatives and collaborations in the future. She extended her gratitude to all participants for their active engagement and gave special thanks to the Austrian Presidency and Ms. Martina Hartl for their significant role in organizing the meeting.

Mr Viktor Nedović emphasized the importance of the topics discussed and encouraged participants to use the outcomes of the meeting to foster future activities, cooperation, and tangible results. He also thanked all participants, the Austrian Presidency, the DRC and the University for Continuing Education Krems.

Annex I: Agenda

Agenda

REGISTRATION AND WELCOME

- 09:00 – 09:30 **Registration**
- 09:30 – 09:45 **Joint welcome and opening remarks from PACs and EC**
Viktor NEDOVIC and Lubica PITLOVA, PA7 coordinators
Johan MAGNUSSON, EC DG REGIO

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

- 9:45 – 10:00 **Information on PA7 activities in the second half of 2024**
Dijana ŠTRBAC, Jaroslava SZUDI
- 10:00 – 10:15 **Information from the Presidency**
Martina HARTL
- 10:15 - 10:30 **Information from the DSP - Update of the activities & the way forward**
Cristina CUC

SHORT REPORTS ON PA7 WORKING GROUPS

- 10:30 - 10:40 **WG DFCN** *Martina HARTL*
- 10:40 - 10:50 **WG ERA** *Lubica PITLOVA*
- 10:50 – 11:00 **WG HEI** *Ivanka POPOVIĆ*
- 11:00 - 11:10 **WG RIS3** *Viktor NEDOVIĆ*
- 11:10 – 11:15 **Q&A**
- 11:15 – 11:45 **Coffee break**
- 11:45 – 12:00 **Danube Cup network, Pal DANYI**

UPDATES ON PA7 FLAGSHIP PROJECTS

- 12:00 - 12:45 **Presentation of the approved PA7 Flagship projects**
HARMONMISSIONS, *Ondrej ZACHAR*
Western Balkans Info Hub, *Elke DALL*
Danube Multilateral Call, *Martina HARTL*



12:45 - 13:00	Q&A
13:00 - 13:15	AOB
13:15 - 13:30	Conclusions of the meeting <i>Viktor NEDOVIC, Lubica PITLOVA</i>
13:30 - 14:30	Farewell light lunch

Annex II: List of Participants

First and last name	Country
Elke Dall	Austria
Martina Hartl	Austria
Johan Magnusson	Belgium
Branko Petrinc	Croatia
Matthias Hadesbeck	Germany (Bavaria)
Ralf Hagedorn	Germany (Federal)
Daniela Chiran	Germany
Pal Danyi	Hungary
Viktor Oroszi	Hungary
Cristina Cuc	Romania
Ivanka Popović	Serbia
Viktor Nedović	Serbia
Dijana Štrbac	Serbia
Jaroslava Szudi	Slovakia
Lubica Pitlova	Slovakia
Ondrej Zachar	Slovakia
Alena Kurecová	Slovakia
Peter Volasko	Slovenia



Annex III: Selected Photos





