

**Interreg  
Danube Region**



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

# DRP 3<sup>rd</sup> call Pre- announcement

## 1. Introduction

The present document is a pre-announcement of the 3<sup>rd</sup> targeted call for proposals. The document details the thematic focus of each specific objective. Only proposals addressing the thematic focus can be funded by the programme.

The applicants are advised to get in contact with the MA/JS priority coordinators to consult their project ideas.

The call will officially be open in mid-September with a deadline for submission 15 December 2025. The starting date of the projects is planned for 1<sup>st</sup> July 2026. The maximum project duration is 30 months.

The programme rules compared to the previous calls for proposals will not be changed therefore the applicants can consult the Applicants Manual of the 2<sup>nd</sup> call until the official launch.

The following **specific objectives (SOs) are closed** in the 3<sup>rd</sup> call for proposals:

- SO 1.1 Developing and enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies
- SO 2.4 Protecting and preserving the biodiversity in ecological corridors and eco-regions of transnational relevance in the Danube Region
- SO 3.3 Enhancing the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation

## 2. Thematic focus and budget allocation

### Priority 1 – Specific Objective 1.2

#### **Thematic focus: AI skills development for delivering products and services with transnational impact in the Danube Region**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming industries and redefining how businesses operate globally. In the Danube Region, there is an urgent need to equip organisations with AI-related skills to enhance competitiveness, drive innovation, and ensure sustainable economic growth. This thematic scope is also strongly linked to the EC COM (2025) 163 mid-term review stating that “digitalisation of public services and the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the public and private sectors are levers for competitiveness.

This call for proposals is targeting projects that foster AI skills development, enabling primarily public and private non-profit organisations supporting businesses, startups, and professionals to leverage AI technologies for transnational collaboration, digital transformation, and creation of high-value products and services.

The **key objectives** of this call are:

- Develop AI-related skills that enhance the delivery of transnational products and services by supporting SMEs, startups and professionals in adopting AI-driven solutions for business growth
- Integration of existing AI solutions into transnational, digital (data-based) ecosystems that utilise technologies such as IoT (Internet of Things), blockchain, XR, digital twins and cloud solutions
- Promote ethical AI, data literacy, and responsible AI development across industries
- Strengthen cooperation between educational institutions, businesses, and policymakers to build an AI-ready workforce
- Foster AI-driven entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems in the Danube Region
- Development of a common transnational AI competence framework for the Danube Region
- Development and training of methods and tools for SMES in the Danube Region to test and securely operate AI solutions

- Build on AI-oriented existing, complimentary platforms and services, that contribute to the implementation of the Danube strategy

Proposed projects should **focus on some of the following areas:**

- AI ethics and governance: development and training on ethical AI use, bias detection, and regulatory compliance to ensure responsible AI deployment
- AI in entrepreneurship: support for AI startups through incubations programs, mentorship, and funding guidance
- Transnational AI collaboration: joint projects between universities, research centres, and businesses to develop transnational AI solutions such as
  - AI training and education: development of AI training programmes, workshops, and certification courses for students and professionals
  - AI for business applications: practical training on AI-powered tools for industries such as manufacturing, agriculture and healthcare
  - AI & digital transformation: programs that help organisations integrate AI into their operations to enhance productivity and efficiency
- AI for Sustainability: AI-driven innovations for climate monitoring, smart cities, and sustainable resource management
- Integration of AI solutions into transnational, digital ecosystems

Depending on their objectives, successful projects should demonstrate the following:

- Increased AI literacy and practical AI skills among professionals of public organisations piloted and tested in their role of supporting businesses in delivering transnational products and services
- Development of AI-based learning materials, training platforms, and certification programmes
- Strengthened transnational collaboration in AI research and development
- AI-driven solutions that enhance economic and social development
- Measures that enable SMEs to better utilise AI
- Increased connection of stakeholders with AI experience with SMEs that lack experience
- Cooperation with existing and well-functioning organizational structures under the EU Strategy for Danube Region

### Partnership:

Primarily:

- Public institutions, innovation and development agencies
- Universities, research institutes, AI training providers, and innovation labs
- Business support organisations and clusters
- Chambers of commerce and digital economy organisations
- NGOs working in digital skills development

Secondly:

- SMEs, startups and industry associations

## Priority 2 – specific objective 2.1

**Thematic focus:**

Considering the provisions outlined in the “Energy transition” section of “A modernised Cohesion policy: The mid-term review” (MTR, COM(2025) 163 final) published by the European Commission and taking into account the still growing need for sustainable, renewable energy solutions in line with the IP of the Interreg Danube Region highlights the necessity to define a targeted 3<sup>rd</sup> call for **“sustainable renewable energy solutions in the context of energy production, heating and cooling systems, grid load, energy communities, district heating and cooling, storage and peak load reduction”** directly linked to focus 1 of SO2.1 “Increasing the share of renewable energy in the Danube region”.

To maximise the impact generated by corresponding **activities the call is focused on small and medium municipalities** to motivate them to participate in the energy transition. This could also allow for capitalization opportunities with ongoing 1<sup>st</sup> call projects like *Danube geoHeCo*, *REHEATEAST*, *StoreMore*, *ESINERGY*, *SMEnergy*, *NRGCOM*, and *DECA*, *Danube Indeet* who already created topic-wise a good foundation that could possibly be taken up or even developed further. To facilitate financing solutions for relevant investments for small and medium municipalities, initiatives such as the European City Facility (EUCF) - that was set up under the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation of the European Union, and is currently being funded as part of the [Life Programme](#) - is also recommended.

## Partnership:

Primarily:

- Regional and local administrations, municipalities
- Regional and local public institutions
- Development/ investment/ energy agencies
- Service providers and SMEs

Secondly:

- Universities, research institutes
- Business support organizations (e.g. financial/banking associations, chambers)

## Priority 2 – specific objective 2.2

**Thematic focus:** The proposed applications can address the three thematic focuses<sup>1</sup> of SO 2.2, but should **target broader territorial scope beyond the urban, municipal level, where transnational level harmonisation and coordination of forecasting, monitoring, preparedness, or reaction is necessary (targeting the Danube River Basin, or its main sub-basins, or the Danube Region, a thematically reasonable, broad and coherent transnational space within, covering the targeted area in its entirety – e.g. a transnational river network, a broad transnational area of DR affected by the same environmental risk with potential transboundary impact) in connection to climate change adaptation and / or climate change induced environmental risks (floods, droughts, wild fires), or accidental pollution of rivers.**

**Partnerships** shall be capable of influencing relevant transnational, national level policies, strategies, or the higher operative levels in the addressed thematic field in all countries of the targeted transnational area.

This can include primarily: e.g. national, regional public authorities and organisations responsible for water-flood management, or related environmental issues; hydro-

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<sup>1</sup> For each specific objective the Interreg programme, available on the DRP website, defines one or more thematic focuses.

meteorological services; disaster management authorities; professional and volunteer civil protection and rescue organisations. Additionally, regional governments; interest groups including NGOs (e.g. international organisation, environmental organisations), research institutions and universities can also be involved in the partnerships.

### Priority 2 – specific objective 2.3

**Thematic focus:** Proposals can address thematic focus 2 (harmonising management practices between relevant sectors to improve the quality and quantity of transnational water bodies) and thematic focus 3 (transnational coordination of water supply management in transnational river(basin)s) of SO2.3. More specifically, the proposed applications should **target potential impacts of climate change on transnational water management by harmonising and coordinating policy approaches, management practises between water management, agriculture, environment, navigation and hydropower to improve the quantity (and quality) of water in transnational river systems of DRB with key topics in relation to water scarcity, balanced use of water and coordinated management of low-water periods on transnational rivers of DRB (considering also that flood management is related to SO 2.2)**. This thematic scope is also in strong connection with the COM/2025/0084 regulation, which aligns cohesion policy investments to the new challenges and priorities identified by the mid-term review of the Cohesion Policy, among others adding water resilience to the scope of water management. The geographic scope of the proposals shall be on the whole Danube River Basin, or at least a sufficiently broad part of it, major transnational river(s), river basin and possibly in the entirety of the targeted river basin.

Project **partnerships** shall be capable of influencing relevant transnational, national level policies, strategies, or the higher operative levels in the addressed thematic fields in all countries of the targeted transnational area. This means also that the partnerships shall have balanced mix of relevant organisations from the water management, environmental, inland navigation, agricultural, hydropower plant sectors according to the specific scope of the proposed project.

More specifically, partnerships can primarily: be built by national, regional public authorities and organisations of the relevant thematic sectors, hydro-meteorological services, infrastructure and (public) service providers (e.g. for water supply, waste-water treatment, hydro power plants, inland navigation).

Additionally: partnerships can be strengthened also by interest groups including NGOs from the relevant thematic fields (e.g. international organisation, environmental organisations, farmer associations), research and development institutions, universities.

### Priority 3 - specific objective 3.1

**Thematic focus: Capacity building for employment support bodies (information and data systems; coordination; training e.g. in social economy).**

Indicative examples:

- Creation of an information system and support for the provision of information and data about life events connected to the periodic and permanent migration of workforce, caused by labour market inequalities between the eastern and the western parts of the macro region
- Build-up of a “Danube observatory system” about labour migration and its impacts on cohesion; involving public bodies responsible for monitoring & evaluation, academia and civil society

#### **Partnership:**

Public employment Services; employment support bodies; universities and research organisations; science parks; companies, chambers and their associations; social partners; sector skills councils; national and regional authorities and development agencies; schools; minority representative organisations.

Note: partnerships with a strong non-EU representation will be appreciated.

### Priority 3 - specific objective 3.2

#### **Focus area 1:**

The first direction of SO 3.2 is to **support Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in the Danube Region**. Any approach would need to be sufficiently flexible to reflect the diversity of VET approaches in the Danube Region. The understanding of CoVEs could include a network of partners that develop local skills ecosystems through cooperation with each other, including VET providers, employers, research centres, development agencies, and

employment services centres of expertise, industrial training institutes/training centres, regional VET centres, industry skills centres, innovative centres Vocational excellence can be understood as a wide reaching and inclusive concept of high-quality skills provision that reflects the needs of employers, learners and society, which encompasses excellence in pedagogy and training, social justice and inclusion, lifelong learning, transversal skills, organization, innovation, continuing professional education and community needs.

*-CoVEs bring together 'a wide range of local partners, including VET providers, employers, research centres, development agencies and employment services (among others), to develop 'skills ecosystems' that contribute to regional, economic and social development, innovation and smart specialisation strategies.'* (ETF 2021, p. 11)- 1

A Danube support approach could potentially build upon the EUSDR Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence/Policy Platform for CoVEs started in 2021. A Danube Region project(s) could complement and further develop this initiative with a more coordinating/operational approach. This could include:

- Pilot programmes of work with a transnational character on specific areas of work e.g internationalization of CoVEs, CoVEs and social inclusion, public private partnerships; CoVEs and smart specialization; lifelong learning
- Creating networks, forums and working groups on specific themes connecting VET policy makers and providers with companies and industry representatives across the Danube Region
- Developing a support function for the understanding, guidance and complementarity of different programmes in the Danube Region supporting CoVEs (National, regional, transnational)
- Awareness and capacity building programmes for CoVEs in the Danube Region
- Strategic CoVE development in fields of transnational interest across the Danube Region

### Partnership:

VET providers including schools; tertiary education institutions; research institutions; science parks; companies, chambers and their associations; social partners; sector skills councils; national and regional authorities and development agencies; public employment services; minority representative organisations;

### Note:

- i) partnerships with a strong non-EU representation will be appreciated.
- ii) Partnerships are strongly encouraged to consult with the EUSDR PAC 9 and to complement the work of PAC 9 and that of other relevant organisations/initiatives such as the European Training Foundation (ETF) and Erasmus+.

## Focus area 2:

In addition to the more strategic approach above, a second direction of SO 3.2 could also include additional approaches at the level of CoVEs.

- The development of existing CoVEs or new CoVEs - developing their excellence potential (see broad understanding of excellence)
- CoVE focussed initiatives to modernise and transform the quality of VET systems to strategically support social, economic and pedagogical changes and challenges, e.g. new skill needs in the context of the green and digital transition
- The formation of multilevel Public Private Partnerships for VET and skills development
- Actions aimed towards embedding CoVEs in local innovation ecosystems and connecting them at the Danube level
- Facilitating the bringing together of CoVEs that share a common interest in specific sectors and innovative approaches to tackling societal challenges (e.g. social inclusion, green skills, digitalisation, AI, upskilling individuals with low qualification levels, etc.)

## Partnership:

VET providers including schools; tertiary education institutions; research institutions; science parks; companies, chambers and their associations; social partners; sector skills councils; national and regional authorities and development agencies; public employment services.

## Notes:

- Centres of Vocational Excellence can be considered as centres of expertise industrial training institutes/centres, regional VET centres, industry skills centres, Innovative centres, centres of competence, etc.
- Vocational excellence is to be understood as a wide reaching and inclusive concept of skills provision which encompasses pedagogy, social justice, lifelong learning, transversal skills, organization, innovation, continuing professional education and community needs.
- Project approaches towards VET should be sufficiently flexible to reflect the diversity of VET systems across the Danube Region
- Project approaches should take into considerations existing initiatives of relevance e.g. Erasmus +; ETF and National/local initiatives
- Upward convergence. This is of particular interest even more so from peripheral regions of the Danube Region
- Social inclusion is an important consideration

Fundamental to the DR approach would be to develop our understanding of the contextual frame and scope for action. This would entail discussions with the EUSDR PAC 9 (Informally very interested in principle and ready to discuss); The European Training Foundation who are very supportive of the CoVE approach and have a significant network, and Erasmus + who directly fund CoVE start-ups/development.

The aim would be to complement existing CoVE initiatives but at the same time to develop a distinct Danube approach linked to the strategic frame of the EUSDR PAC 9 CoVE Policy Platform and the operational work of the ETF and Erasmus+.

#### **Priority 4 - specific objective 4.2**

**4 thematic focuses have been identified for specific objective 4.2. Applicants are not requested to address all the 4 thematic focuses, but they shall concentrate and demonstrate in their application strong contribution to at least on one thematic focus.**

**Thematic focus 1: Tackling the accelerated territorial peripheralization/polarization within the Danube Region and promoting balanced territorial and social-economic development, considering main demographic developments and recent technological advances**

Increasing regional disparities are a specific feature of the Danube Region and closely connected to beneath working demographic trends like brain-drain, depopulation or

deterioration of rural and remote areas. In addition, recent technological advances have the potential to further “fuel” the already ongoing territorial polarization. These inter-linked phenomena are not only aggravating the living-conditions in wide areas of the Danube Region and for certain demographic groups (e.g. youth, elderly or low-qualified workers) but are affecting the (global) competitiveness of the Danube Region as such. Projects tackling single aspects in this fields have been (successfully) realised, yet a much broader and comprehensive strategic initiatives are needed for filling evidence gaps, defining a common territorial *vision* and introducing targeted and sustainable measures for mitigating or reversing existing mis-developments.

**Main activities** shall be grouped around improving and transnationally harmonizing the evidence-base in relation to the topics concerned, a better and more effective alignment of policies needed for counter-balancing the accelerated polarisation within the Danube region and the empowerment of local actors for successfully testing and implementing sustainable solutions. **Main outputs and results** shall cover a governance model vertically and horizontally integrating core-actors in the field concerned, evidence-based and transnationally applicable policy documents as well as tools and action plans for their local implementation.

Expected **partnerships**: core-partnerships under this point shall comprise national/regional ministries responsible for regional development, national and/or regional statistical offices as well local public bodies.

### **Thematic focus 2: Making local (and regional) public governance systems more resilient to crisis-situations (“crisis proof”)**

The COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine showed that crisis-situations not known for decades (or not known at all) suddenly can become real and influence basically all spheres of live. A specific contribution of SO4.2 in this context could consist in developing a framework for improving capacities for the crisis-preparedness especially of local public bodies in fields such as civil protection, maintaining critical infrastructure, dealing with de-stabilizing actions like cyber-attacks or misinformation and providing vital public services.

**Main activities** shall tackle the analysis of crisis-scenarios especially in view of capacities needed for ensuring an adequate preparedness of local actors in the most vital fields, the creation of transnational coordination mechanisms in the field concerned. **The main output** is to be seen in an integrated transnational governance system for crisis-

preparedness overcoming the existent fragmentation (in terms key-actors, frameworks and mechanisms) along “traditional” intervention fields like health, environment or safety.

Expected **partnerships**: core actors under this point are local public bodies, local (public, private or civic) actors involved in civil protection or disaster management as well as infrastructure operators from the local level. This main pillar should be complemented by academic and expert-type of bodies for better understanding the vulnerability of the local level vis-à-vis the multifaceted and interlinked threads. Furthermore, relevant regional and national bodies will be needed for updating policy frameworks and aligning them with a transnational perspective.

### **Thematic focus 3: Innovating and optimizing models of effectively involving citizens in transnational, multi-level territorial planning processes and promoting sustainable democracy**

Models of local self-government and community engagement are multifaceted and have a long tradition in the Danube Region. Yet the big picture shows that many of Europe’s “low-trust-societies” with a low level of active participation in civil society are concentrated on this cooperation area. Larger strategic initiatives are an adequate tool for pooling existing experiences and key-actors and for introducing and testing new models. Whereas democratic participation in general decision making and territorial planning processes can be seen as the core-challenge in this field, new emerging phenomena (like the need for improved media literacy for confronting disinformation campaigns and fake news spreading through digital media) shall be considered too, not only, but also because they affect in particular the youth.

**Main activities** shall focus on the creation and testing of new models for local civic participation or the role – potentials, limitations, risks – of new technological phenomena like social media or AI in increasing institutional trust in the Danube Region. The **main output/result** envisaged is a platform acting as an incubator for innovating participation models and tools and for boosting the cooperation among key civic actors across the cooperation area.

Expected **partnerships**: key-actors under this point are organisations and initiatives representing the civil society, ideally with cross-border or transnational outreach. Partnerships shall be complemented by local public bodies as providers of the enabling

environment needed for improved civic participation as well as relevant policy drivers from the national and regional level.

**Thematic focus 4: Strengthening transnational capacities of public local and regional governance systems for ensuring the functioning of Global / European / Danubian Value Chains**

The war in Ukraine highlighted the complex connections within global value chains and how disruptions in one area can affect different sectors and regions across the EU. The Danube Region – as Europe’s macro-region directly neighbouring a geopolitically more and more instable space – is both more exposed to threads resulting from recent developments and can at the same time contribute more and more directly to overcome (or mitigate) these threads. S.O.4.2 could offer a platform for tackling a specific aspect in this context, i.e. the role of local and regional governments in their interaction with businesses and civil actors for ensuring an effective and sustainable functioning of vital value chains.

**Main activities** shall aim at analysing the vulnerability of crucial value chains from a transnational perspective and the role of local public bodies for ensuring their effective functioning. The **main output/result** is to be seen in the creation of a coordination mechanism for Danubian value chains and increased capacities of local public bodies for sustaining critical value chains.

Expected **partnerships**: key-actors addressed under this point are local public bodies, business support organisations and main economic policy drivers.

**Budget allocation**

Specific objective	Budget available
SO 1.2	2,800,000.00 €
SO 2.1	4,000,000.00 €
SO2.2	5,500,000.00 €
SO2.3	5,000,000.00 €
SO3.1	3,000,000.00 €
SO3.2	3,000,000.00 €
SO4.2	4,000,000.00 €
TOTAL	27,300,000.00 €