

**EU Strategy for the Danube Region
Governance Architecture**

*prepared under the Croatian EUSDR Presidency
2020*

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1. Background

The governance of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) plays a strategic role for the implementation of its actions and the achievements of its objectives, targets and overall goals. Participating states and key stakeholders have made great efforts to build and ensure an effective and efficient governance for the EUSDR at all levels. However, during the past years we have been witnessing a number of negative trends when it comes to management and work in the field: weak participation in meetings, lack of ownership and commitment, insufficient resources, high staff fluctuation, shortcomings in implementation and follow-up of the actions etc. Also the second *Report from the EU Commission on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies*¹ published in January 2019 identified the following areas for further improvement of the EUSDR:

- Strengthen the ownership and commitment of line ministers by emphasizing the potential benefits which the EUSDR may bring and invite them to duly empower the officials representing their ministries at SG meetings;
- Ensure a balanced distribution of Priority Area coordination roles;
- Continue to seek synergies and complementarities with existing instruments and organizations newly emerged or already operating in the region;
- Encourage a continuous participation of all relevant Commission DGs in SG meetings;
- Improve the dialogue between the EUSDR and ESI Funds/IPA authorities in order to identify and fund a broader range of projects and actions in the mainstream programmes;
- Enhance exchange of experiences among programmes which are already funding, or plan to fund, macro-regional relevant projects, even across macro-regional strategies;
- Promote actions, in line with the EUSDR priorities, which bring added value to the EU enlargement process in Western Balkan states;
- For the next generation of the transnational programme covering the EUSDR, find a better balance between IPA and ERDF funds.

Following *the Joint statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the participating states of the EUSDR and European Commission 2015*², this document, which aims at simplifying the interplay between key EUSDR implementers, provides a clarification of their roles.

The Strategy seeks to make best use of what is available in the region (funds, knowledge, capacities etc.), which means that all stakeholders must take responsibility. At this point, better governance must clarify what is essential for the success of our joint approach, including stronger responsibility by EUSDR participating states.

It appears that improvements are especially required in the field of a stronger political leadership and commitment, effective decision-making and greater clarity in the organization of work. We should aim

¹ COM(2019) 21 final and accompanying document SWD (2019) 6 final, 29.01.2019 https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/cooperate/macro_region_strategy/pdf/2_implementation_en.pdf

² https://danube-region.eu/download/150513_brussels_joint_statement_drs/?wpdmdl=616&refresh=5d5fe01d4db281566564381

at a smarter use of existing resources, building on synergies in relevant existing processes, and understand that all governance levels are interrelated and interdependent in the way described in this document.

The main goal of this paper is to:

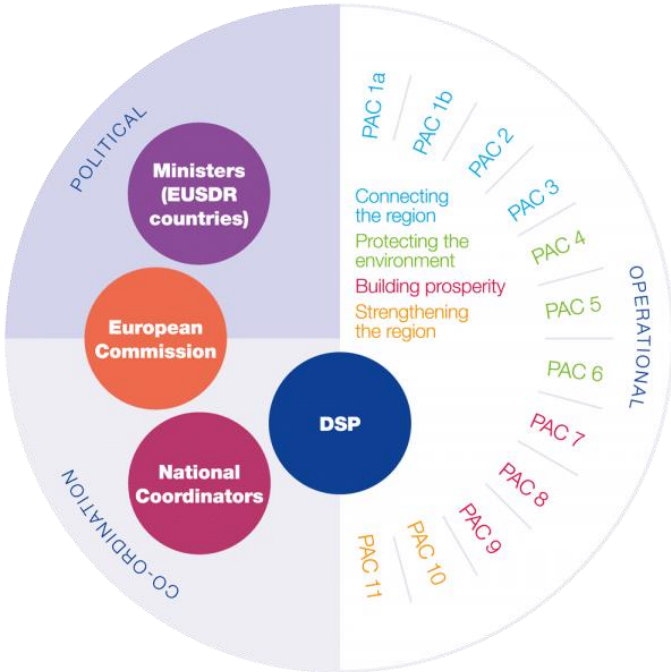
- improve coordination and cooperation in view of further enhancing the commitment to the Strategy and its effective implementation;
- support the development of the necessary administrative capacity to ensure that political commitment translates into effective implementation.

The key is to empower relevant stakeholders and implementers (NCs, PACs, SGs, etc.) and increase the ownership of the relevant line ministries on the national level. Such empowerment also improves mobilization of regions, cities, agencies and institutions such as universities, private businesses and civil society, encouraging them to network, cooperate and participate in the implementation and development of the Strategy.

To achieve the above mentioned, a lean governance structure, effective decision making and clear competence distribution should be in focus.

2. Governance scheme

This chapter defines the roles and responsibilities of the High Level Group on macro-regional strategies, the National Coordinators, the TRIO Presidency, the Presidency, the Priority Area Coordinators, the Steering Groups, the Working Groups, the European Commission and the Danube Strategy Point in implementing the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.



EUSDR governance structure (source: <http://www.danube-region.eu/>)

2.1. The High Level Group (HLG)

The High Level Group (HLG) on macro-regional strategies (MRS) advises the European Commission (EC) on the coordination and monitoring of macro-regional strategies. It is made up of official representatives from all EU Member States and the non-EU states participating in the MRS. The HLG ensures coordination and monitoring across all MRS, assesses progress made in their implementation and may provide policy orientation and strategic guidance. It is the overarching forum where the approaches and practices in each MRS are compared to maximize the leverage and impact.³

The Commission's biennial report on the implementation of macro-regional strategies and the annual HLG meetings provide important overall strategic guidance also for the individual MRS.

2.2. The National Coordinators (NCs)

The NCs are the focal point on the national level and they form the decision-making body of the Strategy. They are the core strategic decision-makers within the governance structure of the EUSDR. They also have a strategic coordination function of the Strategy within their state.

NCs are appointed, and recalled, in written form by their government / respective institution (e.g. line ministry). Each participating state has to officially nominate an NC and / or one or more deputies. They constantly keep the incumbent Presidency and the European Commission updated as soon as changes occur.

As the participating states are governing the EUSDR and they are the sole owners of the Strategy, the key role of NCs, with support of the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) upon request, is to coordinate, guide and monitor the participation of their state in the implementation of the EUSDR including all 12 Priority Areas (considering SG and PAC meetings, etc.), and to liaise with their national line ministries and other relevant organizations to motivate them to consider and implement the EUSDR in their policy field. Hence, they strive for monitoring the progress of the Strategy at macro-regional / national / regional / local level and for contributing to the Strategy's progress by identifying national and transnational needs and putting common solutions on the agenda, bearing in mind the national specificity of each participating state. To enable this monitoring, NCs should be provided with all available reports on the functioning of the Strategy, in particular those of the DTP and the EC. They can request specific reports from the DSP or external expertise. NCs will discuss the evidence and consequences of that monitoring at least once per year. NCs facilitate coordination, consultation and implementation in each state, by identifying relevant contacts, and above all, by advancing practical aspects of the work.

NCs also promote the EUSDR and its visibility and pursue continuous dialogue with relevant macro-regional / national / regional / local stakeholders of key developments and ongoing initiatives, aiming also at facilitating the involvement of relevant stakeholders.

NCs encourage the mutual exchange with relevant programmes (in particular their managing authorities) / financial instruments, aiming at better alignment of policies, resources and funding at

³ Further information on the High Level Group is available [here](#).

national and macro-regional level. This also comprises keeping close contact with the political level in order to secure reciprocal feedback and adjustment, for instance with relevant ministers.

NCs meet at least twice per year including one joint meeting between NCs and PACs. The meetings are organized and chaired by the state holding the rotating Presidency, with the support of the EUSDR TRIO Presidency, the EC and the DSP. NCs define Rules of Procedure for their meetings.

NCs functions include:

- Coordinating and keeping an overview of the active participation of their state in the implementation of the Strategy;
- Acting as interface and link between the operational / management level (PACs, SG, etc.) and the political / ministerial level;
- Informing and involving the ministerial level, as appropriate;
- Ensuring coordination with existing national, regional and local cooperation organizations, as appropriate;
- Raising awareness for the EUSDR and the Danube Region within relevant ministries, for possible stakeholders, as well as the broader public;
- Agreeing to the annual work programme of a rotating Presidency, incl. the thematic priorities of major events;
- Proposing possible revisions of the Strategy and / or the Action Plan;
- Facilitating linkages between PAs (together with PACs);
- Guiding communication, information and publicity about the Strategy;
- Upon request and agreement, providing support and guidelines for the orientation of the EUSDR Annual Forum (e.g. setting the agenda);
- Endorsing a monitoring and evaluation framework;
- Providing leadership for and ownership of the DSP (taking into account the specific requirements following the fact that the DSP is implemented as a DTP project);
- Reporting (via Presidency) to the High Level Group (HLG) on macro-regional strategies;
- Being the guardian of the proper functioning of the governance of the EUSDR, any non-compliance with the principles in this document, affecting the proper functioning of the Strategy, shall be discussed by the NCs.

2.3. The TRIO Presidency

For securing coherency, ensuring strategic stability and greater continuity of the work between Presidency cycles, regular coordination between the incumbent Presidency, the past and the future Presidency is proactively pursued.

The TRIO Presidency has a clear supportive role for the incumbent Presidency. Regular exchange on strategic and coordinative issues has to be secured and Trio meetings are held back-to-back with NC meetings and joint NC and PAC meetings.

EC and DSP are invited to participate in the TRIO Presidency meetings.

The incumbent Presidency, after consultation within the TRIO Presidency, prepares all major meetings and documents.

If so agreed by the NCs, the TRIO Presidency (via incumbent Presidency) represents the NCs vis-à-vis the European political level (e.g. addressing jointly agreed letters on behalf of all NCs to the European Parliament, etc.).

2.3.1. The Presidency

Pursuing a rotation principle, the EUSDR Presidency is taken over by an EUSDR participating state for a one-year period. The Presidency via rotation principle follows the alphabetical order of the participating states with their official English name⁴.

The incumbent Presidency proactively performs the coordination among NCs and PACs, supported by DSP and in cooperation with the EC and strives to facilitate decision-making and cooperation.

The Presidency will organize and chair at least one meeting of NCs, one meeting of PACs and one joint meeting of NCs and PACs, with the support of the EUSDR TRIO Presidency and the DSP, in cooperation with the EC.

The incumbent Presidency is in charge of hosting the Annual Forum, ideally back-to-back with a ministerial meeting where a ministerial declaration should be adopted in order to raise the political profile of the EUSDR, in cooperation with the EC and with the support of DSP.

The main purpose of such a ministerial meeting, convening ministers from all 14 Danube Region states, in charge of an EUSDR or a specific sectoral policy, is to give strategic guidance and secure political commitment both at national and European level. The adopted ministerial declaration should have an impact on the objectives to be reached and the way the related public (sector) policy is being implemented in the Danube Region.

2.4. The Priority Area Coordinators (PACs)

Twelve Priority Areas (PAs) represent the Danube Strategy's fields of action in which the Strategy is contributing to improvements (either through tackling the main challenges or through seizing the main opportunities). The twelve PAs are grouped into four Pillars.

The PAs represent the most important and vital components of the Strategy. PACs and the SG members represent the expertise in the respective sector and drive forward the overall process, identifying key sectors for action and adopting the most suitable goals to implement actions. Having the overview of the sector, they can identify key processes leading to fulfilment of the Strategy's goals through different actions and through selecting how to best implement solutions.

Each Priority Area is managed by two or more PACs coming from different Danube Region states. Each participating state should be authorized as Coordinator of a Priority Area, if willing and able to do so. PACs are appointed and recalled in written form by their government and should have sufficient

⁴ Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany (incl. Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), Hungary, Montenegro, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Ukraine.

capability, mandate and resources to fulfil their tasks for the Strategy. The list of PACs needs to be approved by the NCs. PACs keep the incumbent Presidency, the EC and the DSP updated in case changes occur.

The PACs are key facilitators of the Strategy and serve as a strong liaison between their PA's groups of actors by offering a platform for exchanging and coordinating initiatives, stakeholders, policy processes and information. They work on the implementation of related PA actions, in close contact with the EC and relevant EU agencies, together with relevant stakeholders at different territorial level (EU, international, national, regional, local) and of different background (inter-governmental, non-governmental, experts, academia, multipliers, civil society, financial instruments etc.).

Identifying key processes leading to fulfilment of the Strategy's goals, PACs have an interface and mediating function: they are in charge of coordination, implementation and communication in their specific PA. Their work is purely transnational, inter-sectorial and inter-institutional. PACs act on behalf of all participating states.

PACs with the support of Steering Group (SG) members should assess the situation of each policy area to identify which drivers could be better used, and which barriers must be overcome, if need be. They may then make recommendations to NCs on possible ways to tackle the identified problems, where appropriate. Regular participation of the EC (DG REGIO and line DGs) representatives should be sought in the meetings of the SGs.

The PACs have to monitor and report, as well as communicate their activities to a wider public. For the communication, they should review and update their websites and strive for a consistent "branding" of the EUSDR with the support of the DSP.

PACs may issue Letters of Recommendation for projects in line with their relevant actions based on the decision of the Steering Group.

PACs define Rules of Procedure for their meetings.

2.5. The Steering Groups (SG)

SGs are the central executive and decision-making bodies at PA level regarding objectives, formats and emphases of cooperation and future developments. SG members are "the expert drivers of the day-to-day implementation", who decide on the joint work within the PA together with the PACs and who provide advice and assistance.

The SG represents the key national authorities in the relevant field. As a general principle, PACs aim at securing transparency towards SG members. The work of the SGs is both transnational, inter-sectorial, inter-institutional and aiming at an effective embedding into the various national contexts.

SG members are appointed and recalled in written form by their government and should have sufficient capability, mandate and resources to fulfil their tasks for the Strategy. The PACs update the incumbent Presidency as soon as changes occur.

Non-ministerial / governmental key implementers and others may also attend the SG meetings as observers upon invitation. Non-ministerial key implementers make significant contributions acting also as a link to other networks, such as international organizations (e.g. WTO, ICPDR, Carpathian

Convention), NGOs, trade unions, chambers of commerce, universities and local authorities, thus helping to bring the Strategy "closer to the people".

SG members also support the PACs in reporting and evaluation of the EUSDR – they identify progress related to the improvements of the actions and projects and achievement of targets. They also regularly provide information/reports on their work to their state's NC and the line ministers responsible for PA issues, ensuring a permanent communication flow at the political and operational levels of the Strategy.

Each SG shall define Rules of Procedure for its meetings.

SG functions include:

- Making appropriate and realistic efforts to cooperate towards the formulated targets;
- Identifying actions / projects to be included in the Action Plan, ensuring that they comply with the Pillars' objectives, including crosscutting and horizontal aspects and ensuring their implementation;
- Preparing and regularly updating the Roadmap of Actions of the Priority Area (detailing commonly agreed milestones, setting their deadlines, linking with related projects, tracking status of achievement etc.);
- Identifying relevant funding sources for the actions/projects selected and facilitating and following up implementation of actions/projects, including monitoring and evaluation;
- Ensuring linkages with the other PA Steering Groups;
- Liaising with Managing Authorities/ National IPA or ENI Coordinators of EU programmes in EU and non-EU states;
- With the support of the EC, liaising with: relevant EU programmes managed directly by the Commission; international financial institutions, regional cooperation organizations, etc.;
- Convening and preparing meetings of relevant line ministers in cooperation with the NCs;
- Submitting to the NCs policy proposals and recommendations for revisions of the Action Plan;
- Updating targets, references etc. which do not change the Action Plan substantially, in close dialogue with the EC (substantial changes remain the sole competence of the NCs);
- Support the reporting and evaluation of the Strategy – they identify progress related to the progress in actions and projects and achievement of targets;
- Reporting on PA progress towards EC and DTP will be done by PACs.

2.6. The Working Groups (WG) *optional*

PACs are in charge of setting up appropriate operational working structures, best suited to implement the actions, to agree on a work programme between the stakeholders involved and to trace progress achieved. For these tasks, PA sub-groups can be installed, such as working groups, task forces or advisory bodies around sub-themes.

2.7. The European Commission (EC)

The overall role of the Commission is that of a strategic adviser, i.e. to play a key role in providing strategic coordination of the macro-regional strategies where its involvement brings a clear added value. EC also plays a leading role in the strategic coordination of the Strategy and promotes that it is taken in due account in all relevant EU policies and instruments; it has an essential role in all four EU macro-regional strategies through the Directorate General for Regional and Urban policy (DG REGIO). EC strategically supports the implementation of the EUSDR in cooperation with the participating states, Council and European Parliament. With its institutional background, it helps comparing the functioning of MRS and gives a possibility to promote alignment mostly between MRS and transnational cooperation programmes (also known as Interreg B), but also in case of other EU programmes. DG REGIO is also a key adviser when it comes to prioritizing policies and strategic frameworks.

DG REGIO actively pursues strategic coordination at policy level (Council, European Parliament, Committee of Regions, European Economic and Social Committee, EC line DGs, NCs) and seeks to better interlink and align the Strategy with programmes during programming and implementation (i.e. EU, national, regional, centrally managed funding instruments). DG REGIO actively promotes the embedding of the EUSDR both at the strategic document level (e.g. Partnership Agreements, Operational Programmes etc.) and at operational level (for instance through practical advice and good examples). This is done, inter alia, by promoting continuous dialogue between EC actors (DG REGIO/NEAR state desk officers, desk officers from line DGs) and programme bodies (Managing Authorities, Joint Secretariats, intermediate bodies).

Furthermore, DG REGIO promotes and facilitates the dialogue and involvement of stakeholders within the Danube Region, within the EU (line DGs, programmes, platforms, and other stakeholders) and across macro-regional strategies – in thematic or procedural terms. This also comprises the exchange of information, good practices, lessons learned and solutions perceived for triggering learning effects and for contributing to the streamlining of processes.

As it is the case for all MRS, DG REGIO is in charge of reporting to the other EU institutions (Council, European Parliament, Committee of the Regions, Economic and Social Committee) on the progress made in implementing the EUSDR and the results achieved; including facilitating the bridging with relevant activities at EU-level, like e.g. by ESPON's MRS monitoring, etc.

For that purpose, every two years the EC publishes a report on the implementation of EU MRS to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, based on contributions given by the strategies' key implementers (the first was published in 2016).

The EC attends the NC, PAC and – as far as feasible - SG meetings in its advisory and supportive role and supports participation / involvement of line DGs in the PAs' work.

2.8. The Danube Strategy Point (DSP)

The Danube Strategy Point (DSP) is a strategic working unit and supportive body for the EUSDR, which supports the implementation, communication, capacity building, monitoring and evaluation of the EUSDR.

The DSP supports both the core strategic decision-makers (NCs) and the operational level (PACs) of the Strategy. Additionally, it enhances the connection of the Strategy to EU financial resources and to DG REGIO. The DSP thus has a supporting function for the Strategy, easing the communication and coordination among the (Trio) Presidency, the EC, NCs, PACs, further stakeholders and the wider public. Its primary role is to support the EUSDR implementation, communication, monitoring and evaluation and interlinking with DTP.

Furthermore, DSP offers technical support to PAs and supports the development of capacities of all actors involved, taking into account the multiple challenges posed by different fields, especially non-EU states.

Through various activities in those areas, DSP also provides necessary information to the NCs, feedback and proposals for streamlining the operational and political decision-making processes.

DSP seeks to promote the EUSDR within the Danube Region, but also on European level by performing agreed communication activities.

DSP supports the alignment of the Strategy and funding instruments and collaboration with strategic actors and other MRS.

DSP should also carry out a cross-reference analysis of the work and projects made in the PAs.

One of the DSP's functions is to ensure the institutional memory of the EUSDR and contribute to the capacity building of its main actors.

DSP's day-to-day work is done in close contact with the incumbent Presidency.

3. Danube Transnational Programme (DTP)

DTP is considered as key partner for implementing the EUSDR objectives (see relevant Interreg regulation). DTP projects have important functions in this respect.

The governance arrangement between DTP and the EUSDR will have to be specified during the DTP programming process 2021-2027.

In the 2014-2020 period DTP provided financial support to the PACs, to the DSP, and to the Annual Forum. Therefore, it is an essential instrument for the implementation of the EUSDR. Furthermore, projects and activities funded by the DTP shall be fully aligned with the EUSDR. Moreover, studies like the territorial analysis carried out for the preparation of the DTP's programming of the 2021-2027

phase are deemed helpful for the EUSDR. DG REGIO and DSP support the linkages between DTP and EUSDR. Permanent collaboration between DTP and the EUSDR is enhanced by the regular attendance of DTP Managing Authority / Joint Secretariat in the NC and PAC meetings. Common meetings of the DTP Monitoring Committee (MC) and the EUSDR NCs and / or PACs are considered helpful, in particular during the preparation of a new funding period.

DSP, 22nd July 2020