



9th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

22nd October 2020 | 10:00-16:30 CET

Online

Report

Attendants: 735 registered participants

Attachment:

- Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region



Official opening of the 9th Annual Forum

Official opening by the Moderator

❖ Opening session of the 9th Annual Forum with speeches / greetings

Ms Nataša Tramišak, Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds of the Republic of Croatia, underlined the challenging context of this year's Annual Forum of the EUSDR. In line with the European Green Deal, the Forum focuses on ecology, economy and the social dimension of sustainable development as key areas for the recovery of the Danube Region. In view of the upcoming programming period, she called for better coordination across traditional administrative boundaries, a more efficient management of EU funds and the translation of political support into staff resources for the implementation of the EUSDR. While emphasising the key activities and achievements of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency (HR EUSDR PCY), she shared further ambitions of Croatia to include more stakeholders from the local and regional levels in macro-regional strategies (MRS) activities and called on the shared responsibility of all EUSDR key implementers to achieve economic, social and territorial cohesion in the Danube Region.

Ms Elisa Ferreira, Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, thanked the HR EUSDR PCY for their contributions to the improvement of the Strategy while facing the COVID-19 crisis and the challenge of the earthquake in Zagreb in March 2020. COVID-19 related measures have severely impacted tourism and trade across borders in the Danube Region. In this context, Cohesion Policy has proven to be flexible by providing 14 billion euros under the Corona Crisis Investment Initiative, along with measures such as specific support for SMEs. Looking beyond the COVID-19 crisis, the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) and the Just Transition Fund (JTF) will boost the necessary transitions towards sustainable production, consumption, agriculture, tourism and energy supply in Europe. With the new EUSDR Action Plan, offering important guidance on how to foster green mobility and achieve climate neutrality, the Danube Region is well prepared to face these challenges. Commissioner Ferreira encouraged all EUSDR stakeholders to continue their efforts in shaping a prosperous, green and connected Danube Region.

Mr Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of the Republic of Croatia, highlighted the three political objectives of the HR EUSDR PCY: 1) strengthening the role of regional development and affirming macro-regional strategies as instruments for stimulating regional development in the EU, 2) creating synergies between macro-regional strategies and Cohesion Policy and 3) cooperating with the countries of the Western Balkans and, in this sense, supporting EU integration processes. The EUSDR has strengthened the region considerably in the past 10 years, which is why Croatia is committed to continue cooperation within the EUSDR as well as within other MRS. Prime Minister Plenković called on embedding the European Green Deal as well as the digital transformation within EUSDR activities and welcomed the contribution of civil society to activities in the Danube Region.

❖ Keynote speaker

Mate Rimac, a Croatian innovator, entrepreneur and founder of the Rimac Automobili Company, was the key note speaker of the 2020 EUSDR Annual Forum. Mr. Rimac was named by Forbes Magazine as



one of the Top 30 under 30, the 30 best entrepreneurs under the age of 30 of the world, in 2017. His success story represents the potential for innovation and growth in the Danube Region.

❖ Ministerial Meeting

During the 9th Annual Forum, the joint meeting of ministers responsible for the EUSDR was held. As a result of the meeting, a Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region was adopted. The main references of the Statement are to the Revised Action Plan SWD (2020) 59 final, the new endorsed Governance Architecture Paper, the embedding process into EU programmes and the upcoming 2021-2021 funding and financing period and the EU Green Deal.

❖ Plenary Session | Harmonious and sustainable development of the Danube Region – Joint introduction for panels

The plenary session comprised of three keynote speeches, from representatives of the European Commission (EC) and of institutions managing EU Funds.

Mr Giacomo Luciani (DG REGIO) stated the fact that MRS can be a platform for the promotion of the European Green Deal (EGD) and underlines the complementarities of EUSDR and EDG in light of the fields of coordination, the cross-sectoral approaches, multi-level governance and stakeholder involvement.

Mr Miroslav Vesković (Joint Research Centre) introduced the concept of quintuple helix that also includes the environment as a factor. In his speech, he underlined that the EDG is both global and local and the regions should strive to become SMART. Resilience is the key for future development. Mr Vesković reminded both the importance of bringing non-EU stakeholders closer to the Union and the necessity of embedding MRS into post 2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

Ms Naida Mekić (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, Croatia) elaborated on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis and explained how REACT-EU will be implemented in Croatia in the national patterns. Ms Mekić underlined that efforts have to be made to connect the Danube Region in order make it competitive in light of the new MFF. She closes by reminding all participants that challenges can be better tackled collaboratively.

❖ Thematic Session I | The ecologic perspective of sustainable regional development

Ms Ana Kobašić (EUSDR PAC 6, Croatia) welcomed participants together with **Mr Florian Ballnus** (EUSDR PAC 6, Bavaria, Germany) and underlined that according to the latest records the loss in biodiversity is unprecedented globally. In order to reverse this negative trend, transformative change across economies and societies is needed. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown us how nature and people are far more interlinked. The four macro-regional strategies follow the global and EU policies and offer transnational solutions to global problems. The panel will try to address



questions related to the state of ecosystems in the Danube Region, the importance of the macro-regional approach in reaching the EU agenda and stock taking of MRS solutions, existing solutions and solutions that can be implemented in the out coming period.

Mr. Mario Šiljeg, State Secretary at the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development welcomed participants to Thematic Session on ecologic perspective of sustainable region development. He pointed out that sustainable development respecting the objectives of European Green Deal is the only way forward across all Strategy objectives.

Ms Anne Teller (Senior Expert, DG ENV) presented the main conclusions and outcomes of the EU ecosystem assessment published on 21st October 2020. The report represents an integrated narrative linking the pressures to the analysed ecosystems assessing their condition and see this affects the delivery of ecosystem services, especially the regulating services. Wetlands the least protected ecosystem. The main pressures identified were climate change, invasive species and fragmentation. Soil is to be seen as a cross cutting element. The main messages of the assessment include the fact that there has been some improvement as a result of legislation being in force, but this positive evolution is at risk when faced with the effects of climate change. Conservation and preservation of ecosystems must be up scaled beyond the protected area towards the buffer zones and urgent actions must be taken in order to bend the curve of biodiversity loss and stop degradations. Ms Teller invited the audience to consult the assessment and announced that an executive summary is being prepared. In the end of her presentation Ms Teller commemorated Ms Georgina Mace, ecologist and conservation scientist.

Mr Aljoša Duplić (Acting Director, Institute for Environment and Nature, Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, Croatia) centred his speech on the importance of ecological connectivity in terrestrial ecosystems in the context of fragmentation representing the biggest pressure, influencing the genetic viability and diversity and number of species, the possibility for migration and zoonosis- the latter being very important in the context of COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most important ways to improve ecosystem connectivity is green infrastructure also in urban and peri-urban areas to support the green corridors. In order to meet the green targets it is important to cooperate at state level between all countries in the region as nature does not limit to political borders.

Ms Irene Lucius (Regional Conservation Director, Worldwide Fund for Nature Central and Eastern Europe, Austria) presented the solutions that the macro-regional approach can offer to the sustainable development of the Danube Region in light of the EUSDR Action Plan and need for youth involvement. These include joint learning and knowledge exchange, cross border and cross-sectoral planning. The transnational projects offer an excellent example of how regional cooperation can help support management of shortcomings in sustainable development, maximise synergies and contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Mr Peter Gammeltoft (Chair of the Danube Sturgeon Task Force, DSTF, and member of the OECD Water Governance Initiative) focused his presentation on the importance of breaking the silos for preserving migration corridors of sturgeons as this must transcend national, regional and local borders being of transnational importance. He presented the situation of the six sturgeon species in the Danube and Black Sea area, two being considered extinct, three critically endangered and one very vulnerable in continuous deterioration due to deliberate or accidental catch and poaching, loss of habitat due to land use change, navigation, pollution, flood protection measures all these leading to loss of migration.



❖ Thematic Session II | The economic perspective of sustainable regional development

Ms Nirvana Kapitan Butković together with her colleague **Ms Judit Schrick-Szenczi** (EUSDR PAC 8, Croatia and Baden-Württemberg, Germany) opened the 2nd Thematic Session on “The economic perspective of sustainable regional development”. Digitalisation and circular economy were identified as key enablers for reaching the objectives of the European Green Deal. Nevertheless, enterprises in the Danube Region often face the challenge, that clean products and technologies are not yet available, or are not developed in such a way as to become world leaders. However, this is necessary to enable economic development and ensure inclusive transition. Ms Kapitan Butković pointed out that the panel will therefore underline the economic aspects of regional development. It will be discussed, how to encourage a more systematic cooperation in order to contribute to all the functionalities required for human life and the economic development. She invited the panellists to present their field of action.

Ms Sanja Popović Pantić (Institute Mihajlo Pupin, Serbia), presented first results of a recent study of the Danube Region, covering the COVID-19 pandemic effects on businesses of relevant sectors while focussing on female entrepreneurs. The study revealed different, in part very different, trends based on the various business sectors. For example, about 10% of respondents were unable to continue their business due to COVID-19, while the same percentage of 10% were able to improve their business during the pandemic. Significantly, female entrepreneurs experienced tremendous declines in income as a result of the restrictions, making them one of the most vulnerable groups in the Danube Region. They should therefore receive particular attention in further policies and cooperation towards more sustainable development. As concrete measures to raise competitiveness of female entrepreneurs, Ms Popović Pantić highlighted the need for enhanced cooperation and networking to strengthen the position of female entrepreneurs – not only women to women but also women to men. Another measure to increase competitiveness could be to bring together large and small business players in the Danube Region.

Mr Johannes Lutter (Urban Innovation Vienna, Austria) dealt with the question of how companies can become global leaders and presented the Smart City Vienna Framework Strategy, a strategy for sustainable development on regional level. One of the main challenges was to establish a transition to a more sustainable development of enterprises while still being competitive. Hence, a crucial part of the strategy is that Vienna is to become the innovation leader city by 2030 (climate-friendly and affordable). Mr. Lutter also gave concrete examples of how it can be put into practice for companies to become global leaders. At programme level, for example, an environmental service package for local companies was created (OEKO Business Vienna) and at project level, sustainable cooperation in local energy supply was initiated (energy supplier and chocolate manufacturer). On the role of international cooperation in urban competitiveness, Mr Lutter mentioned the exchange of experience and knowledge of best practise and ideas with other cities as well as the importance of developing cross-border value-chains to stay competitive (e.g. cross-border automotive cluster in Vienna).

Mr Gerd Meier zu Köcker (ClusterAgentur Baden-Württemberg, Germany) highlighted the importance of regions and their efforts to stay competitive and adds that emphasis should be put on a targeted support. Each region is affected by the COVID 19 crisis with a different magnitude. What is missing is that the support packages at national level are not always tailored to the specifics of the regions. But it is precisely these support measures tailored to the regions that are needed to respond to the regions'



needs. Moreover, it is important to distinguish sustainability in a social context and at the level of competitiveness. Mr Meier zu Köcker referred to clusters in the EUSDR which can be used by policy makers for sustainable development. However, in the EUSDR there is often a mismatch between the political thinking that clusters are necessary, but in reality, not many clusters exist. These patterns should be considered for the next MFF.

Mr Sandi Orlić (Institute Ruđer Bošković, Croatia), put the emphasis for the competitiveness on the science sector. He underlined, that the quality of science depends very much on the regions and varies between them. Mr Orlić referred to the question of how the different developments in the science sector in the Danube Region can be balanced. This can be done, for example, through sustainable knowledge transfer and technology transfer. The aim is to win (young) people for science and thus for a better future. One focus in the science sector with different developments should therefore be to balance out the heterogeneity.

❖ Thematic Session III | The social perspective of sustainable regional development

Mr Roland Hanak (EUSDR PAC 9, AT) moderated the session and briefly introduced PA9 people & skills and its eight actions.

Mr Filip Miličević (Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, Croatia) presented his experience in embedding the objectives of the EUSDR into the ESF in Croatia. The Managing Authority is taking baby steps towards embedding by allowing transnational partnerships. Meetings with ministries about possible projects and transnational cooperation help to gain a better picture in which fields embedding should be pursued. The aim is not only to allow transnational partnerships but also to stimulate them in order to build a bridge between different countries and bring together all parties.

Ms Ulrike Damyanovic (European Training Foundation, Italy) illustrated the relevance of vocational education and training for resilience and sustainability. Vocational education can support a green and digital economy and helps in the crisis. She highlighted the importance of skilled people and the need for a better cooperation between education and companies. The focus of vocational training measures has shifted from the quality and relevance for the labour market to resilience and sustainability. A lot has already been achieved, but many challenges are still there.

Mr Stephan Waba (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, Austria) talked about learning and competences to support the green and digital transition. He shows how digital education is conveyed to Austrian students (11 to 15 years old) to build competences for a digital transition. The five areas of competence are orientation, information, communication, production and action. Students learn e.g. critical interpretation and reflection of online information sources, how to deal with viral content distribution and how to apply basic programming structures.

Ms Ivana Cesarec (Ministry of Interior, Croatia) presented innovative and interdisciplinary approaches in civil protection and knowledge sharing of resilience. She pointed out that flood risk management should be based on knowledge and that strengthening the resilience of communities is important to secure a sustainable development and maintain the quality of life. She also refers to the DAREnet project, a network to strengthen flood resilience in the Danube Region. The project is funded by Horizon 2020 and has a clear link to the EUSDR.



❖ Plenary Session | Harmonious and sustainable development of the Danube Region – Joint conclusions of panels

Mr Roland Hanak (EUSDR PAC 9, Austria) presented the main conclusions of the panel dedicated to the social perspective of sustainable regional development. The topics discussed included the embedding, as national regulations offer opportunities that are used in the EUSDR, e.g. through the ESF network (1st speaker) and vocational education and training (VET) as well as the New Skills Agenda for an enhanced cooperation with politics, as new incentives are needed (2nd speaker). In addition, emphasis was put on green transition and digital education, discussing the concrete implementation e.g. for pupils (3rd speaker), as well as on the achievements of the HR EUSDR PCY, precisely in the field of civil protection following a H2020 project with strong links to the EUSDR (4th speaker).

Mr Miroslav Vesковиć (Joint Research Center) presented the main conclusions of the panel dedicated to the economic perspective of sustainable regional development and proposed to emphasise on the quintuple helix as the environment is crucial. As the panel fostered the development on environmental and social level, the thematic discussions included the prominent role of female entrepreneurship (1st speaker), the implementation of urban innovation (2nd speaker), the need for tailored measures and clusters for the specific needs of the regions (3rd speaker) and the importance of science and businesses links to prevent brain drain and to foster brain circulation (4th speaker). He further proposed to foster Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) in the Danube Region.

Mr Florian Ballnus (EUSDR PAC 6, Germany) presented the main conclusions of the panel dedicated to the ecologic perspective of sustainable regional development. The topics discussed included the presentation of the outcomes of the EU Ecosystem Assessment published on 21st October 2020 on the status of biodiversity, the diversity plan, droughts and floods as well as of forests, including two concrete examples on how the EUSDR can contribute to transnational incentives (1st speaker). In addition, the pressure on ecosystem services by fragmentation (2nd speaker) tackled through resilience capacities of habitats, ecological connectivity and migratory species, as well as solutions offered by MRS to sustainable ecological development in the Region, such as nature-based-solutions, a cross-sectoral approach, to foster work between PAs and to open to civil society and maximise synergies with other MRS were discussed (3rd speaker). Further emphasis was put on the achievements of the Danube Sturgeon Task Force as project based work (4th speaker). The panel concluded for the need of strong commitment for joint measures while taking cultural, economic and ecological patterns into account.

❖ Parallel Thematic Sessions: Instruments for financing the development of the Danube Region

Session I | Danube Transnational Programme, present and future: new priorities for 2021-2027 (DTP)

The scope of the DTP workshop was to present the key challenges of the Danube Region identified in the Territorial analysis and their link with the selected Policy and Specific Objectives selected by the Task Force. The moderator presented the main steps in the programming process, starting with the SWOT analysis of the region, the definition of the challenges where transnational cooperation can



trigger the change and the selection of the Policy and Specific Objectives to be tackled by the future Danube Transnational Programme.

CESCI representatives opened the session by introducing the status of the Danube Region based on the Territorial Analysis and Territorial Strategy, the latter highlighting the transnational cooperation responses to the challenges identified.

The new trends of the region compared to the 2014 territorial analysis are presented below:

- Joint actions in combating climate change;
- Need for cooperation in the development of circular economy;
- Re-bordering, re-emerging strict(er) border regimes;
- Emergence of smart cities;
- High growth potential hindered by labour shortage;
- Uncoordinated management of immigration to the region and emigration from the region;
- Intensifying labour migration from the eastern to the western part;
- Digitalisation; Industry 4.0; need for (harmonised) smart specialisation strategies and policies;
- Need for e-governance and long-term territorial governance structures.

Following the introduction of the challenges of the region, the **MA/ JS Project Officers** presented the Policy Objectives and the Specific Objectives selected by the Task Force, in connection to the trends and challenges of the region. Also, it was highlighted that the focus of each Specific Objective selected is still to be discussed with the TF members in the following meeting to take place in November.

- PO1 A smarter Europe
 - SO1 (i) enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies
 - SO2 (iv) developing skills for smart specialisation, industrial transition and entrepreneurship
- PO2 – A greener, low- carbon Europe
 - SO1(ii) Promoting renewable energy
 - SO2 (iv) promoting climate change adaptation, and disaster risk prevention, resilience, taking into account ecosystem-based approaches
 - SO3 (v) Promoting access to water and sustainable water management



- SO4 (vii) enhancing biodiversity, green infrastructure in the urban environment, and reducing pollution
- PO4 – A more social Europe
 - SO1(i) Enhancing the effectiveness and inclusiveness of labour markets and access to high quality employment through developing social infrastructure and promoting social economy
 - SO2(ii) Improving access to inclusive and quality services in education, training and lifelong learning through developing infrastructure, including by fostering resilience for distance and on-line education and training
 - SO3(v) Enhancing the role of culture and tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation
- ISO1 – A better cooperation governance
 - SO(i) enhance the institutional capacity of public authorities, in particular those mandated to manage a specific territory, and of stakeholders

❖ **Parallel Thematic Session II | Meeting of EUSDR National Coordinators with Managing Authorities from the Danube Region**

The session was moderated by **Ms Ilze Ciganska** (Interact) and **Mr Robert Lichtner** (Danube Strategy Point).

Moderators welcomed participants, introduced the speakers and presented the aim of the meeting and current framework. The meeting aimed to facilitate exchange on EU fund support to the implementation of the EUSDR and initiate networking between national and regional managing authorities (MAs) responsible for European Structural and Investment Funds and IPA/NDICI funds. The support to EUSDR and alignment of funding programmes is especially highlighted in the preparation for the programming period 2021-2027. This is not only due to the fact that cooperation has been recognised as a key horizontal principle, but also due to the reduced budgets which call for more efficient and coordinated investments. More importantly, current health and economic crisis call for closer cooperation as the challenges we face today know no borders. It is also clear that funding needs in the Danube Region go far beyond pure networking aspects and pure creation of cooperation formats.

Mr Mislav Kovač (HR EUSDR PCY) presented the outcomes of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency and thanked the MA representatives for attending the meeting. He explained the embedding process undergone during the HR EUSDR PCY with the support of EC, DSP, Interact, NCs and PACs based on the revised Action Plan. Therefore, a functional tool had to be identified in order to translate the actions from the AP into the language of national and regional programmes, heaving in mind ESF, ERDF, IPA and NDICI provisions. PACs identified a shortlist of topics that can be linked to the funding sources available for the 2021-2027. The shortlist was done based on strict criteria regarding consistency with national and regional priorities, eligibility of funding in the programming period, linkages to Annex D



of the European Semester for member states and relevant reports for non-EU countries, include horizontal themes and do not represent standalone activities. These topics were agreed by the NCs and endorsed after receiving feedback from all relevant authorities. The next step that should be implemented by the SK EUSDR PCY is to start working directly with the national and regional authorities and identify the relevant themes reflected in the future programmes. Another very important step is the monitoring of the process that can only be done with the support of the EC.

Ms Andreja Jerina (EUSDR NC SI) congratulated the HR EUSDR PCY for the online annual event and reminded participants on the importance of the political commitment expressed during the ministerial meeting. She underlined the importance of ensuring financial support to the MRS in the context of the 3 No's but also the necessity of the financial dialogues between MRS stakeholders and relevant national authorities. Ms Jerina positively appreciated the strong message reflected in the inclusion of MRS in Annex D of the European Semester and Country reports by the EC. She underlined the importance of defining the monitoring of the embedding process and assessment of its outcome before deciding on the implementation. Ms Jerina named the EC as the crucial actor in the supporting the embedding process and expressed hope that the colleagues in DG REGIO can offer the NCs an assessment of the level of embedding in the draft operational programmes in order to jointly decide on future steps. She made similar observation towards DG NEAR regarding the IPA Regulations. Ms Jerina underlined the importance of cross macro-regional exchange on adopted flagships for priority actions in order to identify synergies and impact but also to make monitoring process more effective and ensure that MAs are addressed in a similar structured manner. Ms Jerina asked for collaboration of MAs as MRS and strategic topics bring value to money, solutions and knowledge.

Mr Colin Wolfe (Head of Western Balkans Regional Cooperation, DG NEAR) underlined the importance of the Western Balkans policies in the new cooperation context and informed the participants about the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans¹ as well as the importance for the development on sustainable transport, renewable and efficient energy, implementation on green measures, digital connectivity, boost of the economic sectors. He also underlined the fact that the western Balkan market is actually formed of small economies but with important human capital potential. DG NEAR has plans for creating a common regional market and bring investments that would increase the service quality in the region. A major set of steps need to be taken in order to create business and innovation spaces and support connections between private and public sectors in order to develop business in the regions and bring in different approached for development of human capital (i.e. vocational training). In terms on flagship projects, they extend across the region to the neighbour EU countries (i.e. Coastal highway from Croatia to Montenegro, Albania and Greece, removing bottlenecks on the Danube river, demining of the Sava river, waste and waste water management). However, the regional policies for the non-EU countries are not as advanced as the ones for the member states as steps still need to be taken in the IPA programming but once that is in place, complementarities with funds available for member states. Mr Wolfe nominated the EU Delegations and National IPA Coordinators as crucial actors for the embedding process together with the National Coordinators and Brussels headquarters. He called for focused efforts in promoting new cooperation frames and look for the added value in different areas that offer opportunities that are already existing in macro-regional strategies. He appreciated the importance of agricultural development for the Western Balkans.

¹ COM(2020) 641 final.



Mr Johan Magnusson (DG REGIO) reflected on the long-term perspective of monitoring the embedding as his unit is in close cooperation with the geographical units in screening the national and regional programmes in following the legal requirement regarding the linkage with the MRS. He assured participants that line DGs are also involved in the process and that follow-up measures will be installed in order to measure the actual implementation of the provisions.

Mr František Koločány (SK EUSDR PCY) affirmed the importance of continuing the embedding process to the incoming Slovakian presidency (SK EUSDR PCY) of the EUSDR. He underlined the importance of increasing the visibility of the EUSDR via tangible projects implemented in the region and appreciated the current times as an opportunity to mobilise important EU funds. He presented the organisational structure in Slovakia as currently the same ministry deals with both EU funds and EUSDR and therefore communication is easier between Mas and macro-regional representatives.

Mr Michal Blaško (SK EUSDR PCY) thanked the HR EUSDR PCY for the great efforts in defining the short list of priorities of EUSDR and preparation of the MA platform. He informed the participants on the strong political commitment expressed during the ministerial meeting and asked the HR EUSDR PCY to share with all participants at the forum the Ministerial Declaration adopted during the aforementioned meeting. SK EUSDR PCY will focus on effective cooperation and embedding on thematic level by offering the shortlisted topics to all programmes not only ETC, national and regional but also to the directly managed ones and on financial level by supporting the financing of the EUSDR flagship projects.

Mr Mislav Kovač (HR EUSDR PCY) agreed to share the adopted Joint Statement and informed participants that a report on the discussions held during the forum including future recommendations will also be developed.

Mr Filip Miličević (ESF MA network, Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, Croatia) thanked the organisers for the meeting and other panellists for their interventions. He appreciated the importance of involving different stakeholders in the cooperation activities, not only MAs, as this approach increased ownership of the process. He underlined the importance of participating in the Danube ESF Network in sharing knowledge on transnational cooperation and macro-regional strategies and the positive impact on the programme implementation. He advocated for further efforts of the MAs in cooperation with the EUSDR NCs in order to promote the benefits of the embedding process and reach common understanding at national level on the meaning and expected outcomes. He appreciated that including the possibility of implementing partnership projects is a first step and that apart from the political support practical guidance must be offered. Mr Miličević also underlined the importance of establishing an MA network in understanding the process and the expected results and also in discussing the practical issues and concerns.

Mr Roland Mayer-Frei (DG REGIO) asked the MAs to express their opinion in the creation of this network and present whether they already have connections to other MAs in the region.

Mr Viktor Oroszi (EUSDR NC HU) presented the Hungarian experience in embedding the Strategy at national level and the importance of the national committee in promoting the activities and cross compliance of the EUSDR PAs and investment priority axis of the national programmes. Also, the EUSDR national stakeholders are involved in the programme committees of both current and future programmes. A national analysis of the complementarities of the EUSDR PAs 2, 4, 5 and 6 to the national programmes was prepared and 29 projects were identified. The national coordinator was involved in explaining the added value of transnational soft projects and gave the example of the Joint



Tisza measures that are going to be implemented via the national programmes of the riparian countries. Mr Oroszi appreciated the positive outcomes of a MA cooperation network.

Representative of MA Environment Sectoral Programme, Czech Republic expressed the difficulty for the programme managing bodies in identifying contribution of projects to macro-regional strategies.

Mr Roland Mayer-Frei (DG REGIO) explained that MAs usually answer that either all financed projects can be linked to the MRS, or that no projects are connected to the macro-regional objectives. He called for NCs and MAs to jointly analyse the shortlisted topics in order to design together investment steps and identify joint actions between the partner countries and common denominator.

Mr Ivano Magazzu (Interact) reflected on the difficulty of the implementation of the cooperation components by the mainstream programmes. He summarised the simplification of the cooperation approach by moving from the complexity of Interreg by building a cooperation component at regional level among the advantages together with better focus on the needs of the specific region and use of international and bilateral agreements within the national or regional programmes. This implies maximum flexibility in the selection of the operations and liked to less competition for funding. Also, the private sector actors can be included in such operations unlike the ones financed by Interreg. Complementariness with Interreg projects can be reached by expending such cooperation activities into the main-stream programmes. Mr Magazzu introduced the Cooperation Guidelines that is currently being developed by Interact and that is expected to be delivered by the end of November.

Mr Johan Magnusson (DG REGIO) invited National Coordinators to update on the status of embedding at national level during the next NC meeting as programmes are being currently sent to the EC.

Mr František Koločány (SK EUSDR PCY) expressed the support of the incoming EUSDR PCY to the network of MAs and underlined the importance of preparing a support paper on the importance of the embedding process and clear steps and proposals.

Mr Mislav Kovač (HR EUSDR PCY) thanked participants for the contribution and discussions and expressed high appreciation towards Mr Roland Mayer-Frei for the work, contribution and guidance during his mission in DG REGIO.

❖ Closing session & Concluding remarks

Ms Vittoria Alliata – di Villafranca (DG REGIO) thanked the HR EUSDR PCY for the important work and the organisation of the Annual Forum as well as the participants for the active participation. She highlighted the importance of the MA Networks, which should be up as soon as possible in order to facilitate process of embedding the priorities of the Strategy in the relevant EU funding programmes. She referred to the morning sessions and emphasised that the approach of MRS is ideal to tackle ecologic, economic and social issues for a harmonious and sustainable development of the Danube Region. Lastly, she wished the forthcoming SK EUSDR PCY a successful work.

Ms Nataša Tramišak, Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds of the Republic of Croatia, per video message thanked for the participation and emphasises that macro-regional strategies are an evolutionary European approach for tackling the common challenges based on strong transnational cooperation. Efforts within the Danube strategy should aim to promote sustainable development and



Cohesion Policy. There is a need to strengthen the political commitments, to recognise the ownership of this integrated and macro-regional approach at national level, to create partnerships and common strategic projects with secured funding that are crucial for the region and that can help reaching tangible results. She further highlighted the revised Action Plan, which was adopted during the Croatian Presidency, and the process of embedding. Now is the time to translate these great initiatives and ideas into concrete actions and changes. As a final word, she thanked the European Commission, National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators, Danube Transnational Programme, Danube Strategy Point and the whole presidency team for all the support and excellent cooperation.

The upcoming **SK EUSDR PCY** (Mr Michal Blaško) reports on its motivation to take over the presidency and expresses its appreciation of the Croatian presidency and their achievements. The SK EUSDR PCY will concentrate on the ongoing process of embedding the strategy into the European structural and investment funds and on the involvement of non-EU countries.

Ms **Veronika Remišová** (Deputy Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic for Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation) expresses the political commitment to the EUSDR. The priorities in during the SK EUSDR PCY will be digital transformation, innovation and climate change. Ms Remišová also offered their support to the incoming 2022 Ukrainian EUSDR Presidency (UA EUSDR PCY).