

## **Joint Statement of Ministers responsible for Innovation and Digitalisation of the participating countries of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region**

**Bratislava, 26 October 2021**

We, the Ministers responsible for innovation and digitalisation of the participating states of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (hereinafter referred to as „EUSDR“), met on 26 October 2021 at the occasion of the Tenth Annual Forum of the EUSDR in Bratislava, jointly organised by the Slovak Republic, the European Commission and the Danube Transnational Programme with the support of the Danube Strategy Point, agree on the following joint statement:

The digital transformation stands for a digital revolution, changing the world as we know it at unprecedented speed. Digital technologies have changed the way businesses operate, how people connect and exchange information, and how they interact with the public and private sectors. European businesses and citizens alike need an adequate policy framework, appropriate mechanisms and infrastructure to make the best use out of the enormous value created by the digital economy and make a success of digital transformation.

By all means, sustainable digital transformation has the potential to increase the quality of life of our citizens, to boost competitiveness and sustainability of industries, SMEs and of entire economies, and to accelerate international trade, whilst respecting environmental objectives. Our experience has shown that, especially in turbulent times, it has been the innovators who have always had the leading edge – in becoming more flexible yet resilient, agile and successful – than those who hesitated, providing the added value for the good of all.

Therefore, we commit to foster responsible and trustworthy digitalisation. Promoting European values in shaping global rules and standards to preserve global, open, secure and safe Internet. The necessary investments should be strategic and focused to promote European leadership and European solutions for key technologies, such as artificial intelligence, microprocessors, quantum computing, as well as the establishment of trusted, safe and secure European cloud services. Fostering innovative technologies must go hand in hand with the development of connectivity, cyber-security and digital skills, to increase our citizens' confidence and trust in the new technologies. We have to overcome the digital divide, address the question of digital skills (including gender divide) among countries and among urban and rural areas.

Therefore, we express our commitment to place innovation and digitalisation as horizontal theme of our activities in the implementation of the EUSDR. This relates to all thematic Priority Areas and therefore we need to jointly put efforts into strengthening innovation and sustainable digitalisation considering the needs of different Priority Areas. This is an inevitable precondition to maintain or even increase the wellbeing and the competitiveness of the Danube Region and our citizens.

A better and more focused use of Cohesion Policy funds, national funds and centralised programmes to support the EUSDR objectives is a major endeavour to provide appropriate means for the implementation of the jointly agreed goals of the EUSDR, as laid out in the revised EUSDR Action Plan. The so-called Embedding of the EUSDR into EU funds also includes our commitment to support and drive forward research and development boosting innovations and Digital transformation of our societies. We stress the need to continue seeking

all possibilities to fund the research and innovation activities from Cohesion Policy funds, as well as other relevant EU directly and indirectly managed programmes.

Alongside the mainstream national operational programmes the Danube Transnational Programme also serves as an indispensable source of funding which shall continue to support EUSDR implementation. The nature of this programme allows to finance transnational cooperation to foster innovations and digitalisation of economies in the Danube Region.

Transnational cooperation, beyond national borders and beyond the geographical area of the Danube Region, is of fundamental importance for innovation and digitalisation activities. In the Danube Region, no one must be left behind – this also implies that innovation provide a sustainable future for the whole area. Therefore, we stress the importance of international cooperation among universities, academia and other R&D institutions and stakeholders, including the transfer of innovation and technologies for the mutual benefit of the stakeholders in the Danube Region. This applies alike to EU and non-EU states participating in the implementation of the EUSDR. Supporting the innovation and digitalisation processes in both EU and non-EU states will lead to a more stable and cohesive Danube Region and the whole Europe in line with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans and the post-2020 recovery, resilience and reform priorities of the EU for the Eastern Partnership that delivers for all. In this regard, we also reaffirm our support to the continuation of the EU enlargement process.

In a world full of social, political, environmental, climatic and economic challenges, underlined by the COVID-19 pandemic, that go beyond traditional geographic borders and boundaries, new and innovative perspectives are essential to resolve these urgent global issues. After all it is about the future of our children and grandchildren and the question of what world will they be living in. Young people are the future, but they are also our present. Therefore, it is imperative to let the young generation actively participate in the processes that affect their and our future. We recognise the need of the EUSDR to provide a platform offering youth organisations a better participation in the implementation of the EUSDR. Therefore, we welcome new formats of involvement of the Danube youth in the EUSDR and call upon all interested stakeholders to undertake the necessary steps in reaching this goal.

The European society faces great challenges in many areas of our lives. However, tasks described in the European Green Deal put innovative solutions at the centre of our efforts. Such solutions will have to make green alternatives competitive, affordable, inclusive and broadly acceptable by the people of the Danube Region. Hence, we need to ensure safe and sustainable energy resources as well as low-carbon technologies, while minimising environmental impacts, abating climate change and increasing climate resilience in line with the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change. Increasing the share of renewable energy consumption is a necessary step to ensure energy security towards climate neutrality.

The growing pressure of human lifestyles and more intensive land use call for innovations aimed at mitigating climate change, reduce and cope better with the harmful effects of natural and other disasters while reversing the deterioration of natural resources. On the other hand, human activity often faces natural phenomena that have a significant impact on, for example, infrastructure. Our daily lives are confronted with the need to provide quality water resources that are crucial for the sustainability of human activities and the environment. The already existing and newly invented smart solutions and their regional transfer, e.g. in water

management, agriculture or industry sectors can highly support the sustainable use of our water bodies.

We, the EUSDR Ministers acknowledge the work done and the efforts made by the EUSDR stakeholders to promote innovation and digitalisation in the states of the region. We call upon all stakeholders – the European Commission, national and transnational authorities, universities and academia and other public and private research institutions – to keep science, research, innovation and digitalisation of a knowledge-based society in the very centre of attention of the EUSDR.

In conclusion, we express our political will and commitment in rallying our efforts to provide adequate opportunities to strengthen cooperation in the fields of innovation and digitalisation within the EUSDR and to make the Danube Region an innovative place.