

# Empowering countries and regions for stronger involvement in the EUSDR

## *Guidelines for future work*

The EUSDR comprises 14 countries with different historical and socio-economic backgrounds and positions vis-à-vis the EU: nine EU member states and five EU accession countries. The 2022 Report from the Commission (EC) to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the implementation of EU macro-regional strategies recognises the important role of the EUSDR as a platform for capacity-building and cooperation with accession countries in the framework of EU enlargement and neighbourhood policies. One of the main Slovenian EUSDR Presidency priorities is to promote cooperation among all countries that are members of the EUSDR, focusing on the needs and potential of accession countries. To this end, the Slovenian EUSDR Presidency initiated an institutional exchange with the countries involved in the implementation of the EUSDR and with the relevant EC Directorates-General (DG) in order to propose recommendations for stronger future cooperation within the EUSDR. The discussion 'Empowering for involvement in EUSDR' took place at Brdo pri Kranju on 1 December 2022.

Key messages from the discussion:

- **The added value of macro-regional cooperation should be more visible in both EU and accession countries. This will also attract funding.**
- **The political visibility of macro-regional cooperation should be encouraged by the EUSDR Presidencies at the transnational level as well as at the national and regional levels.**
- **The EUSDR Presidencies should tackle less priorities and focus on current challenges.**
- **The IPA III and NDICI funds provide lower funding opportunities in comparison to other EU funds for member states, which makes cooperation on an equal footing in terms of funding difficult.**
- **The EUSDR should be strongly promoted as an 'enlargement facilitation initiative'.**
- **More discussions and exchanges between EU and accession countries should be held in informal settings. Accession countries could also provide their own coordinated inputs, thereby stepping-up for a more balanced EUSDR implementation.**

These guidelines are aimed at facilitating active involvement in the implementation of the EUSDR. Based on previous observations from institutional exchange, the proposed guidelines for the future work of EUSDR Presidencies, National Coordinators (NCs), Priority Area Coordinators (PACs) and Danube Strategy Point (DSP) are the following:

### 1) **EUSDR VISIBILITY** - FROM NATIONAL TO LOCAL AUTHORITIES:

- a. Active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders** – down to the local level (civil society, business sector, academia, social partners, institutions and initiatives) – *Recommendation 1: Each EUSDR Presidency prepares, together with DSP, a work plan on how to improve the involvement of civil society, business, academia, social partners and the local level in the implementation of the EUSDR. Depending on its focus, this goal should be included in the agenda of one of the EUSDR governance meetings (NC, PAC, NC/PAC) and the EUSDR Annual Forum. This plan will be duly coordinated and distributed together with the EUSDR communication plan to ensure coherence of messaging while engaging with the public.*

- b. **Increase outreach and visibility through impact stories** – Recommendation 2: *Each EUSDR Presidency identifies, together with the DSP and in close cooperation with the thematic experts within the PAs, strategic projects and/or processes (Danube Strategy Flagships) as impact stories and promotes them through various media channels and platforms throughout the EUSDR Presidency cycle. For best results, these materials should be written and promoted using storytelling techniques and accompanied by impactful visuals/images, minding the different target groups. The DSP regularly updates the EUSDR Communication Strategy, the Annual Communication Action Plan and further develops communication activities at all levels. At the national and regional levels, all EUSDR core stakeholders (NCs, PACs, SG members) promote EUSDR impact stories and the EUSDR itself.*

## 2) FUNDING FOR IMPLEMENTATION:

- a. **Active involvement of DG NEAR in EUSDR governance meetings** (NC, PAC, NC/PAC meetings) – Recommendation 3: *Following a consensus with the EC, it has been proposed to add DG NEAR to the Rules of Procedure of the EUSDR National Coordinators in Article 6 “Composition of NC meetings”.*
- b. **Evolvement of Networks of Managing Authorities** – Recommendation 4: *The Network of Managing and programming Authorities (MA) of both ERDF/CF and IPA III/NDICI as well as ESF should be maintained and held regularly. In particular, the IPA III/NDICI network should include active participation and guidance of both DG REGIO and DG NEAR, especially the Country Units. For EU member states, it could be considered to involve DG REGIO’s Geographical Units where needed and meaningful, to intensify the exchange and information flows.*
- c. **Capacity-building and access to funding for accession countries** – Recommendation 5: *The DSP should provide regular capacity-building on the EUSDR and, in cooperation with Interact, capacity-building on the EU, EU funding mechanisms and EU project development.*
- d. **Provide the framework for a sound EUSDR monitoring and evaluation** – Recommendation 6: *The DSP should further develop and implement the EUSDR Monitoring Concept, especially as regards the funding of EUSDR activities, and regularly address this topic in the Evaluations. The outcomes will provide solid data for EUSDR core stakeholders (NCs, PACs, EC) for further development of the EUSDR, including future EUSDR Action Plan revisions, as well as recommendations for improving access to funding in the short, medium- and long-term perspectives. The support of the EC (DG REGIO/DG NEAR) as well as the involvement of the programming/managing authorities (via the MA networks) in this aspect is crucial.*

## 3) POLITICAL AND STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT:

- a. **The role of the EUSDR Presidencies and their priorities** – Recommendation 7: *The EUSDR Presidency’s priorities should ensure a level of continuity from the past Presidencies as well as a response to the emerging challenges also securing the involvement of the future EUSDR Presidencies (TRIO Presidency). The EUSDR Presidencies should focus on one political priority which should be well-promoted, communicated and implemented. The DSP should serve as an institutional memory and support the TRIO Presidencies to maintain a high information flow and a continuity of (long-term) priorities.*
- b. **The role and contributions of the DYC** – Recommendation 8: *Each EUSDR Presidency should closely collaborate with the Danube Youth Council (DYC), e.g. by inviting the DYC to EUSDR Presidency-related events, giving the DYC an active role in such events, collecting DYC inputs on EUSDR Presidency papers/declarations and actively involving the DYC in the EUSDR Annual Forum.*
- c. **Conference of Parliamentarians of the Danube Region** – Recommendation 9: *Each EUSDR Presidency should encourage organising Annual Conferences of Parliamentarians of the Danube Region during its term.*

- d. **Synergies with other high-level meetings** – Recommendation 10: *Each EUSDR Presidency should, apart from the EUSDR Annual Forum, promote EUSDR priorities at different regional events and activities during the entire year.*
- e. **Political importance of macro-regional cooperation at the EU level** – Recommendation 11: *To promote macro-regional cooperation at the highest political level, the EC should, supported by the incumbent EUSDR Presidency, take the necessary steps to ensure live presence of at least one EU Commissioner at the ministerial meeting and the EUSDR Annual Forum.*
- f. **Inclusion of wide range of stakeholders in the PA work** – Recommendation 12: *Representatives of relevant EC Directorates-General should be included in the work of PAs (i.e. joining SG meetings, events, etc.). The participation of a wide range of other external stakeholders, such as international organisations, initiatives and funding agencies, is also encouraged. The DSP should continue to provide support to the PAs in further developing the EUSDR Needs Assessments and support their individual implementation of improving stakeholder involvement within the PAs. The DSP and the PACs could further elaborate joint support to SG's, under the lead of PACs.*
- g. **Capacity-building for all EUSDR core stakeholders** – Recommendation 13: *The fluctuation of staff at national levels, as well as on the part of the NC, PAC and SG members, is an issue that will remain reality within the MRS core-governance structures. General and targeted tailor-made capacity-building activities should be further developed and regularly provided by the DSP (where needed, together with Interact and others).*