

Establishment, Implementation and Current Challenges of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, redefining the relationship of the European Economic Community with its neighbours and expanding eastward was essential in order to ensure economic growth and European stability. The adoption of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region in 2011 – which took place during the Hungarian EU presidency – also acted in this direction. Since then, in this European growth space, moving towards the realisation of the goals defined in the joint Action Plan of the 14 countries, the strategy has helped to strengthen political cooperation, adopt European standards, share experiences between the EU and accessing countries, contributed to an improved connectivity in the region and to the management of transnational challenges. In the absence of own funds, it is necessary to embed the strategy into existing EU funding schemes. In the current geopolitical situation, European stability and expansion are of particular importance, for which the Danube Strategy can provide important support as a matured development framework.

The historical development of macro-regional cooperation in the Danube region

The Danube as a space-organising force and economic resource, a defence line, or even a transport corridor has determined the lives and relationships of the ethnic groups living there for thousands of years. Throughout history, many empires have tried to expand their borders in the area of the river's watershed. Starting with the Roman Empire only nine states were able to do this to a significant extent. However, in most cases the Danube region was in a marginal position with the exception of the Pannonian Avar Empire, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Empire, also called the only Danube monarchy. The start of steam shipping and the establishment of the conditions for free navigation through the Paris Peace Treaty of 1856 and the resulting increased trade relations acted into the direction of a unified Danubian identity, mostly in the settlements along the river. At the same time, the political fragmentation of the region began, which can be observed even in recent decades. All of this resulted a Danube being the most international river in the world today, with 19 countries sharing its catchment area.¹ The 44.7% ratio of border areas (territories located closer than 30 km to at least one state border) in the region is also very high in European terms.² In this situation, the European Union and the countries of the region need to channel different political intentions and national interests into a unified channel and strengthen the cohesion of the region.

¹ ERDŐSI et al. 2002: 55–70; HARDI 2012: 35–44.

² CESCOI 2019: 4.

One of the first examples of the strengthening of international cooperation in the Danube region was the creation of the European Danube Commission and the River Commission in 1856 as a result of the aforementioned Paris Peace Treaty. The jurisdiction of the former extended to the Danube Delta and was supervised by the great powers victorious in the Crimean War to ensure uninterrupted navigation in the estuary region. The latter could not fulfil its function on the river section and suspended its activities two years later. After the First World War, within the framework of the Treaty of Versailles and the Paris Conference (1919–1920) the victorious powers created uniform regulations for shipping from Ulm to the estuary. To control this, the International Danube Commission was established in 1920. This organisation operated until 1938, then it ceased due to the war (German occupation). After World War II, the Danube Commission was established (having its headquarters in Budapest since 1954) with the adoption of the Belgrade Convention in 1948 in order to create new international shipping conditions.³ In the scientific field, regional cooperation dates back to 1956 when the International Association for Danube Research (IAD) was created and registered in Austria. In 1983, thanks to the universities of Ulm, Vienna, Linz and Budapest, the cooperation between teachers and researchers was further strengthened by the establishment of the Danube Rectors' Conference, which now has 64 universities from 15 countries as members.⁴ The Working Community of the Danube Regions has been trying to promote the connections of local communities along the Danube since 1982. It was established at the initiative of Lower Austria and all together 41 member provinces have joined it so far.⁵

At the fall of the Iron Curtain, the European Economic Community faced new challenges, thanks to the change in the geopolitical situation, the currents of globalisation and the liberalisation of trade. Redefining the relationship with its neighbours and expanding eastward was essential in order to ensure European stability. After the Cold War, in addition to military and security policy issues, environmental, humanitarian and economic and financial threats also intensified. In addition to the common foreign and security policy established by the Maastricht Treaty, it was also necessary to provide other answers to the new challenges that arose at the regional level. In order to stabilise the continent, strengthen cooperation and support economic growth, the creation of growth spaces was seen as crucial. The 1990s were the period of the creation of multilateral euroregions. The Danube–Körös/Crișul–Maros/Mureș–Tisza/Tisa, Vág/Vah–Danube–Ipoly/Ipel, Danube–Drava–Sava Euroregions were also created in the region at that time, helping to eliminate the peripheral situation of the border regions and prepare for their EU integration.⁶

The next milestone was the agreement signed in Sofia on 29 June 1994 in order to ensure the sustainable management and use of the surface and groundwater resources of the Danube region. As a result, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) was established in 1998 with its seat in Vienna, to which the

³ GYURCSÍK 2019: 18–22.

⁴ MÄRZ 2003: 11–14.

⁵ ARGE Donauländer 2023.

⁶ CZIMRE 2004: 125–131; WASSENBERG et al. 2015: 42–47.

European Union later joined as a contracting party. International Danube Day is celebrated in 14 Danube countries every year on 29 June at the day of adoption of the convention. The beginning of the environmental and nature conservation civil cooperation covering the whole Danube region can also be dated back to this time with the foundation of the green NGO network of the Danube Environmental Forum in 1999.

Thus, macro-regional professional cooperation had institutionalised aspects at various levels until the turn of the millennium, when, as a forerunner of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), Austrian experts prepared the first development concept for the Danube region on behalf of the European Commission under the name Danube Space Study. Its basis was Austria's accession to the EU in 1995, as well as the preparation for the further expansion of the Union and the definition of the related development goals.⁷ A significant part of the Danube region formed a unified economic and political area first, owing to the accession of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia to the EU in 2004 first, and later with the enlargement of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. This provided the opportunity for further macro-regional ideas. Parallel to the process of EU expansion, in Budapest in March 2006, the countries along the Danube declared their intention to cooperate in harmonising the region's development plans and territorial policies. In 2008 Austria and Romania proposed the EU support for the Danube macro-regional initiative.⁸ Even this year, the Committee of Regions (CoR) has expressed its support for this approach and created three interregional groups including the Danube Region, whose secretariat was provided by Baden-Württemberg thanks to Peter Straub founding chairman. As an initial step in the Ulm process the CoR interregional group consisting of Bulgarian, Hungarian, German, Austrian, Romanian and Slovak regional representatives, as well as Croatian and Serbian guest members urged the preparation of a European Union macro-regional strategy dealing with the Danube basin. Subsequently, on 6 May 2009, at the initiative of the state of Baden-Württemberg and Danuta Hübner, the EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, a summit meeting of the Danube countries took place in Ulm and the participants adopted the Ulm Declaration. One of the main goals of the declaration was to prepare a strategy to strengthen the territorial, cultural and economic cohesion of the region. Based on that, in the new EU multiannual financing framework starting from 2014, the Danube region could be designated as a common development and research area.⁹

Another important element of the multi-threaded events was that the fourth conference of the Danube Cities and Regions was held in Budapest on 11 June 2009. As a consolidation of the cooperation dating back to 1998, the Council of the Danube Cities and Regions was established at the event.¹⁰ Just a few days later, the European Council asked the European Commission to prepare a strategy for the Danube region until the end of 2010.¹¹ Meanwhile, in 2009 the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was established as the first macro-regional strategy of the EU.

⁷ HARDI 2012: 248–253.

⁸ SZABÓ 2011: 13–15.

⁹ HARDI 2012: 248–261.

¹⁰ Council of Danube Regions and Cities 2023.

¹¹ Council of the European Union 2009.

In response to the Council's decision, experts from 13 countries and international organisations, including the ICPDR met in Vienna in February 2010 to facilitate compliance with environmental criteria during the creation of the Strategy.¹² Not long after, the Budapest Declaration was adopted, to which all six non-EU countries joined in addition to the eight EU member states at the time. It was stated that the strategy should be based on a common approach, synergies and the more effective use of existing EU financial instruments. At the same time the main pillars of the strategy were also indicated.

As the first step in the creation of the strategy, the European Commission held an extensive consultation involving the stakeholders of the countries concerned. The comments from the region were finally received by the European Commission by June 2010.¹³ From the civilian side, the tight schedule was met with criticism, leaving not enough time for the development of civil sector proposals in all countries. They voiced this in their February resolution, and then started to build a civil network supporting self-organisation.¹⁴

In connection with the consultation, the Hungarian National Danube Conference took place in January 2010 including four thematic panel discussions: in the field of institutional development, socio-economic development, sustainable development – environmental protection and Danube culture-identity. Even this consultation confirmed that the territorial demarcation should not only affect the area along the Danube in a narrower sense, but should extend to the entire watershed of the river.¹⁵ However, this is not clear to many people to this day, because it can be interpreted on two territorial levels, and it is interpreted in this way. Some of the investments focus on the river itself and the river valley (e.g. waterways, ports, flood protection, etc.). At the same time, the strategy envisages the integration of a macro-region, typically with “soft” and not necessarily with infrastructural development goals. It also integrates areas that have little to do with historical “Danubeness”. The watershed is less a part of the mental map of the people living here than the river itself. Thus, the territorial aspect of the strategy is truly ambiguous, in contrast to the natural geographical foundations of other macro-regions (Alps, Baltic Sea).

The appearance of the EUSDR among the priorities of the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency

One of the central elements of the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency that enjoyed political consensus was the topic of water. The Danube Strategy thus had an important added value also in connection with the exchange of ideas between member states on the European Commission's comprehensive water policy proposals scheduled for 2012.¹⁶

¹² PAVISA–KULCSÁR 2010: 122–137.

¹³ SZABÓ 2011: 13–15.

¹⁴ LÜTGENAU 2011: 134–135.

¹⁵ PAVISA–KULCSÁR 2010: 172–179.

¹⁶ GORDOS 2011: 125.

With Government Resolution 1150/2010 (VII.9), the Hungarian Government approved the third Hungarian contribution, incorporating the valuable elements of the first two entries made by the previous government.¹⁷ In it, the most important national priorities were summarised. Project proposals were also formulated somewhat ahead of schedule,¹⁸ considering that the negotiations with the twenty-sevens will be in focus during the 2011 Council Presidency. The Hungarian contribution dealt primarily with the issue of water governance and integrated water management, and the protection of the significant domestic groundwater resources. In case of social consensus, the improvement of shipping conditions along the Danube was formulated as a goal while simultaneously taking into account the aspects of environmental and nature protection. It was declared that due to the continuous costs of maintaining the waterway – which burdens our country disproportionately – demonstrable benefits must be ensured. The document emphasises that green economic development and investments should be one of the promising ways of regional economic growth. The improvement of energy security, strengthened market competition, increased use of renewable energy sources and the energy efficiency of buildings were taken into consideration as priority tasks in connection with the climate change adaptation and mitigation. It also indicates that the Hungarian Government holding the consecutive presidency of the EU will play a key coordinating role in the adoption of the EUSDR. The implementation of the Strategy was proposed to be divided into two stages according to the available financial framework. First, for the planning phase until 2013, then for the implementation phase of the EU financial period starting after 2014.

The EUSDR and its Action Plan was published by the European Commission on 8 December 2010 involving 14 countries (Figure 1).¹⁹ The EUSDR was previously discussed only among the 14 countries involved. In January 2011, during the Hungarian EU Council Presidency it had to be introduced to the other member states of the European Union informally involving also the non-EU countries of the Danube region. According to the first ideas priority areas could only be coordinated by EU countries, since it is an EU policy.²⁰ However, this proposal changed by the time the Strategy was launched, as Croatia, Moldova and Serbia also performed the tasks of priority area coordinators from the beginning. Regarding the management of the EUSDR environmental risks priority area, an agreement was reached with Romania at the ministerial level (especially with reference to the actualities of the Tisza cyanide pollution in 2000 and the red mud disaster in October 2010). The Strategy was finally adopted as planned by the General Affairs Council at its meeting on 13 April 2011. Thereafter, workshops preparing for the actual launch of the EUSDR were planned in the presidency program until the June meeting of the European Council.²¹

¹⁷ FEJES 2011: 5–12; PAVISA–KULCSÁR 2010: 76–93.

¹⁸ PAVISA–KULCSÁR 2010: 154–165.

¹⁹ European Commission 2010.

²⁰ FEJES 2011: 5–12.

²¹ Council of the European Union 2011; FEJES 2011: 5–12.



Figure 1: Map of the area covered by the EUSDR

Source: Land Baden-Württemberg s. a.

Enhancing institutional cooperation and involving the civil society are among the goals of the 10th priority area of the Strategy. Related to that, the Danube Civil Society Forum (DCSF) was established at the end of the Hungarian EU Presidency.

The EUSDR's impact on economic and social development

Monitoring the implementation of macro-regional strategies²² and evaluating their impact is a complex issue. Some of their added value is easier to measure, while evaluating less tangible results and defining their measurable indicators is a significant challenge. In connection with the Action Plan created in 2010, the definition of the targets of priority areas (a total of 57 targets) for the actions took place already in the first year of implementation and then in 2016 they were already reviewed. In 2018, the countries decided to update the Action Plan together with the planning of the European Union's 2021–2027 multiannual financial framework and in response to the newly emerging challenges and trends. Finally, it was adopted in 2020 containing only 85 actions instead of the previous 137 to have a more focused strategy.

²² European Commission s. a.

Together with the EU Strategy for the Adriatic–Ionian Region (EUSAIR) adopted in 2014 and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) launched a year later, the countries of the four macro-regions and the priority area coordinators prepare a report on their activities for the European Commission every two years. Based on these, the Commission compiles its staff working document on the implementation of the macro-regional strategies and biannually Council conclusions are adopted. In its latest conclusion of June 2023, the Council emphasised on the one hand the need for robust data on the impact of the Strategies, including mobilised EU funding for their implementation. On the other hand, the need to improve the monitoring and evaluation and to increase the visibility of the results of the Strategies has been acknowledged.²³

The first attempt to evaluate macro-regional governance was the European Commission's 2013 report. Five years after the adoption of the EUSDR, at the initiative of the Commission, a dialogue on evaluation began with the involvement of stakeholders. Recently, the formulated targets are very diverse and in many cases are not very ambitious (they are aimed at organising an event) or are just too general (e.g. strengthening the common fight against corruption). The deadlines assigned to the goals are missing in many cases, leaving the question open, or assuming continuous cooperation. In other cases, targets were determined in the short term (some only until 2021), but in case of the biodiversity priority area, they uniformly extend to 2030, and in other cases the end of the EU budget period was marked in accordance with the financial framework. All of this was greatly influenced by the so-called “three non-principles”.²⁴ According to this, the creation of macro-regional strategies does not require new EU funds, but emphasises the better use of existing ones, does not create new institutions and does not require amendments to EU legislation.²⁵ The amount of available funds has remained open ever since. Thus, the formulation of the targets and their associated workplan is still made difficult by the uncertainty of the funds available for projects and investments for the actors involved in the implementation of the EUSDR.

The examination of the added value of macro-regional strategies from the point of view of EU funding programs and projects was published in 2017 by Interact.²⁶ From the point of view of the programs, Strategies help coordinate resources, develop better projects and implement them efficiently from the program budget, increase the visibility of the programs and help involve new stakeholders. Macro-regional strategies serve as a strategic framework and reference for projects. They help to place the project idea in a broader political context, to find partners and the networking among institutions, to achieve a more significant political impact and the capitalisation on project results.

²³ Council of the European Union 2023.

²⁴ CHILLA–SIELKER 2016.

²⁵ European Commission 2010.

²⁶ TOPTSIDOU et al. 2017.

Simultaneously with the development of the new Action Plan, METIS prepared the operational evaluation of the EUSDR.²⁷ According to this, one of the main results of the strategy is the creation of cooperation structures and new partnerships (such as the cooperation of authorities and volunteer organisations in the framework of the disaster management working group). Cooperation between EUSDR 12 priority areas²⁸ is less intensive. A good example is the joint working group of the “Waterways mobility” and “Security” priority areas to simplify administrative obstacles of navigation. The Strategy’s relationship with the directorates general of the European Commission is changing and the utilisation of centrally managed EU funds also needs improvement. Over a decade chains of interlinked projects have been built up drawing on multiple funding sources (e.g. in the fields of shipping, sediment management, disaster management, national park cooperation). Co-operation with the pre-accession countries and thus strengthening regional integration is also an important added value of the Strategy.

One of the main criticisms was aimed at ensuring the participation of those capable people who have enough capacities, expertise, a clear mandate and able to influence the political decision-making in their country. In this way, the decisions made in the framework of the Strategy and the results achieved there can be communicated more effectively to the decision-makers and operational programs providing funding at the national level. Participation in the Steering Group meetings of priority areas varies by country and area (Figure 2). The activity of the Hungarian experts was the highest, while in case of countries outside the EU ensuring the participation costs related to EUSDR meetings is also problematic. It is true that this is somewhat overridden by the experience of participating in online meetings since the Covid pandemic. Staff fluctuation has been significant in recent years, which also makes capacity building impossible. All of this highlights the importance of the shared institutional memory provided by the Danube Strategy Point (DSP) – the secretariat supporting the implementation of EUSDR – which was established first in Brussels and has been operated from Vienna and Bucharest since 2018. In addition, the DSP should facilitate the external communication of the strategy, the promotion of success stories and stimulate the cooperation among the priority areas.

The EUSDR’s policy impact assessment was completed for the first time in 2022. Accordingly, the implementation of the new Action Plan progressed well and in the absence of own financial resources, the embedding of the EUSDR into the EU funding framework was comprehensively implemented during the programming of the 2021–2027 period.²⁹ In order to share experiences and identify synergies, the three regional networks of the ESF, then the ERDF/CF, and finally the IPA/NDICI Managing Authorities were established. Every priority area defined 3 strategic topics out of the 85 actions included

²⁷ METIS 2019.

²⁸ Danube Strategy Point s. a.

²⁹ OROSZI–JENEI 2016: 1–10; SPULE et al. 2022.

in the Action Plan to facilitate easier financing. An embedding tool was developed which includes good practices (e.g. project evaluation, coordinated calls for tenders, targeted calls) for the program managers.

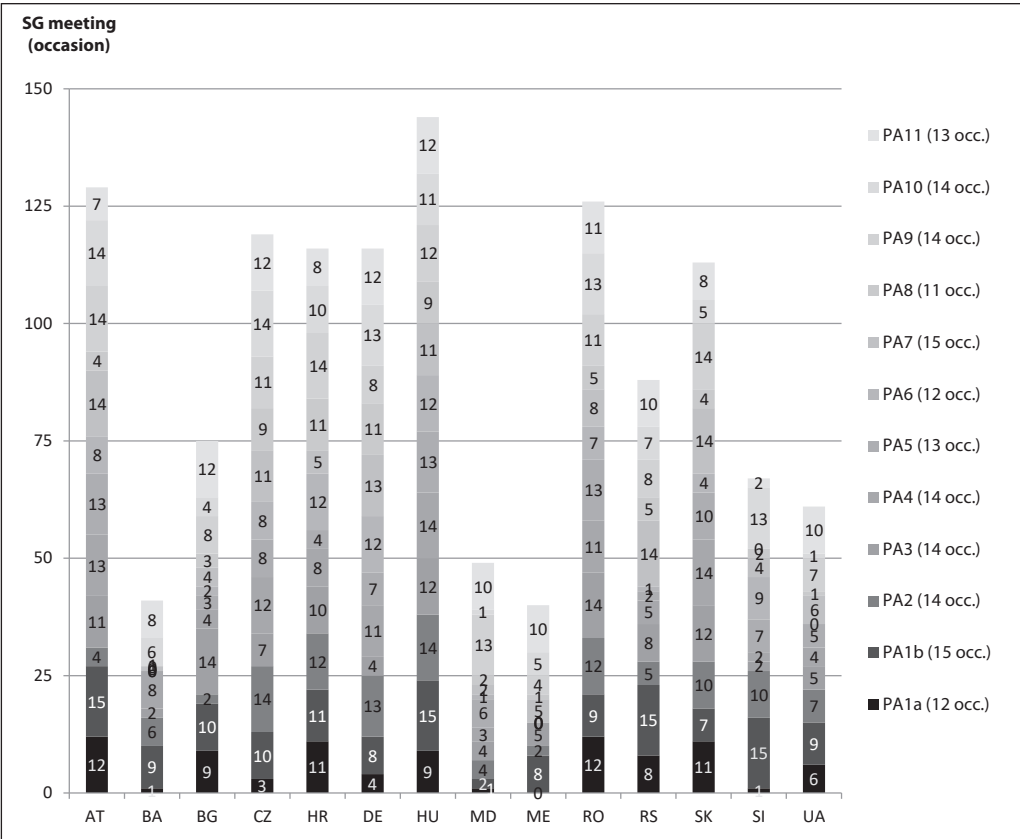


Figure 2: Participation on EUSDR Steering Group meetings by country and priority area in 2015–2021
 Source: Compiled by the authors based on DSP data

Former EU Commissioner for Regional Development Pawel Samecki formulated it already in 2009, and before the establishment of the EUSDR, Government Commissioner Etelka Barsiné Pataky also emphasised that the success of macro-regional strategies will be determined to a large extent by projects and initiatives that provide tangible results and added value for the regions, thereby helping to bring them closer to the citizens.³⁰ In connection with the involvement of civil society, as we have seen, a civil forum (DCSF) has been operating since 2011 and the Participation Day is organised annually together with preparatory national hearings. The Danube Youth Council was established in 2022 with the involvement of two young people per country, helping to involve the younger generation in decision-making with an advisory role.

³⁰ FEJES 2011: 5–12; KAISER 2011: 55–74.

The political support of the EUSDR has declined compared to the years around its adoption. The number of ministers and EU commissioners who appear at the ministerial meetings held annually on the sidelines of the Annual Forum, as well as the forced transition from the voluntary presidency to the chairmanship following the English ABC in 2024, is a good indication of this. In its latest conclusions, the European Council specifically underlined the importance of the continuous political commitment and ownership of the countries participating in the implementation of the EUSDR.³¹ Along with this, the first conference of Danube parliamentarians was organised in 2013. Since then, it has taken place twice in Budapest (in 2014 and 2018). During the latter, the participants decided to ensure continuity and hereinafter the country holding the EUSDR Presidency should organise the conference. Despite this, it was not possible to convene the parliamentarians of the Danube countries during 2021–2023. Reaching high-level decision-makers is achieved only in the case of some priority areas. Regarding the fairway rehabilitation and maintenance masterplan of the Danube, the transport ministers of the region adopt conclusions at their meeting every two years (from which the Hungarian side regularly stays away). In the area of Security, the ministers meet every three years, the latest in 2023 for the third time. Furthermore, the Integrated Tisza River Basin Management Plan – renewed in the framework of the JOINTISZA project – was approved by the ministers of the five Tisza countries and the Secretary of the ICPDR in Budapest in September 2019. In terms of national coordination and advocacy, the Hungarian national coordinator's role has shifted to an operational level in the last decade (the tasks of government commissioner dedicated to the EUSDR were first taken over by a ministerial commissioner, then it was appointed to a head of department and finally a head of section under the political supervision of a deputy state secretary who has much broader responsibilities). Since the adoption of the Strategy, an intergovernmental working group has been operating with the participation of Hungarian experts delegated to the Steering Groups of the priority areas, Managing Authorities, Office of the National Assembly Directorate for Foreign Affairs, Danube Commission, the ICPDR and since 2022 the Hungarian members of the Danube Youth Council.

The Hungarian EUSDR Presidency in 2017 can be evaluated as another significant moment in the implementation of the strategy after 2011. On the one hand, it facilitated to start a European political and expert dialogue about the role of macro-regional strategies after 2020 and their main financing directions and needs. The Hungarian Presidency emphasised the importance of EU enlargement from the point of view of the Danube region and fostered the involvement of non-EU countries. In terms of policy, the presidency programme focused on regional energy security and the diversification of energy sources, as well as the future of green transport and the development of regional transport linkages. The timeliness of these priorities is also corroborated by the energy crisis that arose in connection with the Russian–Ukrainian war, the establishment of solidarity

³¹ Council of the European Union 2023.

lanes and the European Green Deal adopted later. The Hungarian Presidency also tried to direct the attention of citizens to the Danube and its watershed by organising the *One Day of the Danube* photo contest and the Annual Forum, which attracted more than 1,200 participants from 35 countries. The implementation of the “70 marathons for the Danube” project helped the involvement of local decision-makers and people living along the Danube from its source to its mouth.

On the occasion of the Strategy’s jubilee in 2021, the major results of ten years were summarised by the Hungarian coordination.³² Simply to mention some added value of the EUSDR it can be highlighted that Danube Navigation Standard Forms (DAVID) were developed to harmonise border control procedures along the Danube, the master plan for the maintenance of the Danube waterway was completed, and countless transnational projects were implemented to modernise ports, support multimodality, improve the marking of shipping routes and thus increase the safety of navigation. In connection with the development of the regional TEN-T network, new bridges were built on the Danube (e.g. at Komárom, Novi Sad, Belgrade and also on the Romanian–Bulgarian Danube section), new highway connections were built (e.g. the M4 and A5, and the M43 and A3 between Hungary and Romania) and electrification of railway lines also took place. In 2012, the region’s gas market model was completed, followed by an analysis of the gas storage capacities a year later, helping gas market integration. A comprehensive evaluation of untapped geothermal resources was completed in 2014 and its sustainable utilisation for heating purposes was put into practice in a project covering six countries. In 2021, the Iron Age Danube Route was registered as a new cultural route in Europe. The Danube Urban Brand was created in cooperation with several municipalities to strengthen the Danube cultural identity. The sediment transport of the Danube, the methodologies used to measure it and the shortcomings of sediment measurements were mapped for the first time from the source to the river mouth. Sediment management can greatly affect navigation, hydropower production, flood protection and drinking water supply. The measures requiring international cooperation in the field of flood protection were identified and as a first step the exchange of hydrometeorological data between countries was coordinated in relation to flood forecasts. In connection with disaster prevention, a regional network of voluntary and professional bodies was established in 2019, in order to build capacity, transfer knowledge and establish minimum standards for participants in cross-border disaster preparedness. The network of national parks along the Danube has been developed and many projects are being implemented to protect biodiversity (e.g. LIFE Wildisland). The Danube Sturgeon Task Force was created to protect migratory fish (primarily sturgeon, as the flagship species³³ of the Danube). Its activity helps to

³² EUSDR 2021.

³³ PARK 2012. Flagship species are endangered species that are well-known and attract public interest, thus have demonstrative importance (e.g. giant panda, tiger), which also appear as ambassadors of nature conservation campaigns for nature conservation purposes, such as the protection of their valuable habitat and other species at risk.

improve the longitudinal connectivity of the river, the mapping of potential habitats and the coordination of species protection. Within the framework of EUREKA, a program for the support of innovative small and medium-sized enterprises, three Danube region calls were launched in 2015–2018 with the participation of 11 countries, from which 18 Hungarian enterprises received 650 million HUF funding. The organisation of several regional cluster conferences on Hungarian initiative, the formation of the Danube Chambers of Commerce Federation, or the Artificial Intelligence Working Group also help to improve the competitiveness and internationalise the region's businesses. To stop the emigration of skilled work force from the region, a governance model supporting practice-oriented higher education was developed within the EDU-LAB project and 50 organisations committed themselves to the long-term management of the issue by signing the "Danubian Charter for Young Talents". In order to achieve a higher level of employment, the EUSDR priority area of "People and Skills" helped to establish competence centers in the region. The EuroAccess project support database was created as an online information point in 2016, bringing together information related to project financing opportunities for stakeholders. The EUSDR's priority area of "Institutional Capacities and Cooperation" provided small project fund from European Parliament sources and launched 6 calls from 2014–2018 to support the preparation of larger international projects related to the actions of the EUSDR priority areas. On the Danube River, crime is more prevalent in freight transport. The greatest risk is in the smuggling of excise goods. In the field of law enforcement, it is important to highlight the coordinated police operations of the Danube River Forum (DARIF). It has been organised ten times since 2013 with the participation of ten Danube countries, Europol, Frontex and the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC) and the temporary coordination center was set up regularly in Mohács. DARIF allows the rapid exchange of information between law enforcement agencies and increases its efficiency to combat organised crime.³⁴

The current situation, opportunities and challenges of the EUSDR

The governance architecture of the strategy has been consolidated, and there were no significant changes in it during the 2020 renewal of the Action Plan. At the same time, the tasks of the actors participating in the EUSDR implementation were also formally defined. After the creation of the Danube Strategy Point, the involvement of young people (Danube Youth Council) from 2022 appeared as a new element in the Strategy's life. It helps to address the young generation and facilitate their participation in decision-making with advisory role (Figure 3).

³⁴ KALMÁR 2023: 69–88.

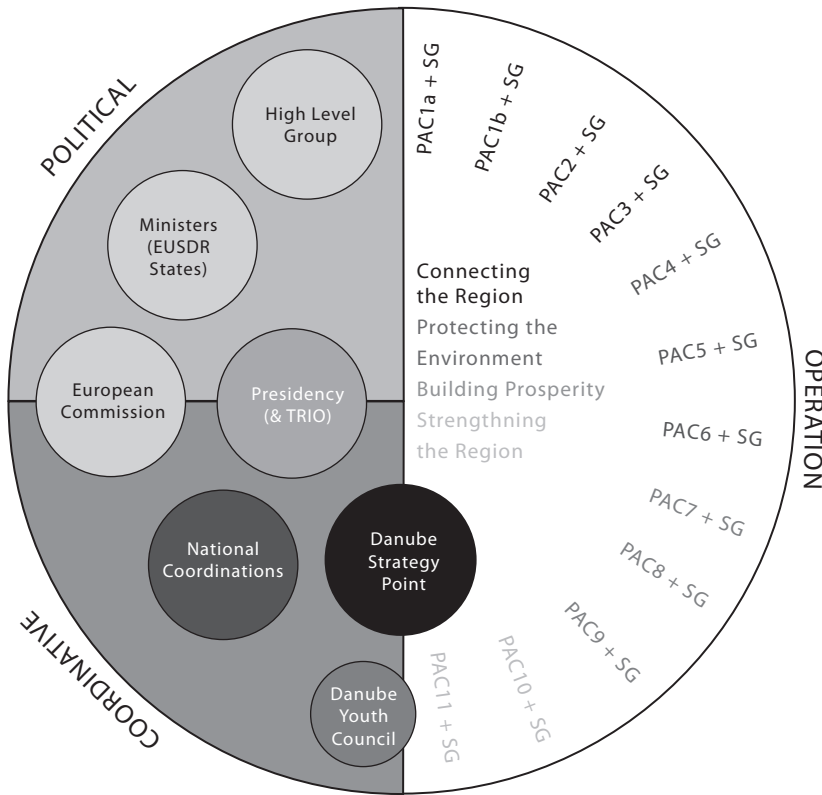


Figure 3: Core governance model of the EUSDR

Source: Danube Strategy Point 2023

The significant economic differences that existed at the time of the establishment of the EUSDR have not diminished in the last decade, which is well illustrated by the regional distribution of GDP per capita values. Taking into account the economic situation of the countries that are about to join the EU, the regional differences in the EUSDR area are significantly larger than in the EU itself. This characteristic distinguishes it from other large regions. In addition, internal migration is significant in the region, primarily to the northwest direction and from the countryside to the urban environment (Figure 4). Some shrinking areas (e.g. Slavonia, the Romanian Plain) are gradually becoming empty. Brain drain and an ageing society threaten the basis of economic regeneration. The border density of the region is much higher than the European average and the density of border crossings is low.³⁵

Intensifying the permeability of borders (e.g. on the Hungarian–Croatian border section), removal of legal obstacles and the establishment of cross-border public services (e.g. in the field of healthcare) would prove to be a significant step forward in order to

³⁵ CESC 2019: 4.

improve the living conditions in the border area. On the other hand, Austria's current obstruction of Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen zone generates another internal Connecting the region. Through the expansion of the Schengen area, economic and cultural relations could be further strengthened.

The Russian–Ukrainian war had many consequences. The role of the Danube Delta and the solidarity lanes increased in value. The diversification of energy sources and the reduction of Russian gas dependence became a challenge to a different degree in each country, for which the priority area of sustainable energy prepared a study in 2022. All this also accelerates the use of renewable energy sources. In connection with the reconstruction of Ukraine, there is an opportunity for repositioning the EUSDR. This is clearly indicated by the fact that the calls of the Interreg Danube Region Program included not only the four Ukrainian counties (oblasts) belonging to the Danube region, but now the entire territory of the country according to the decision of the countries.

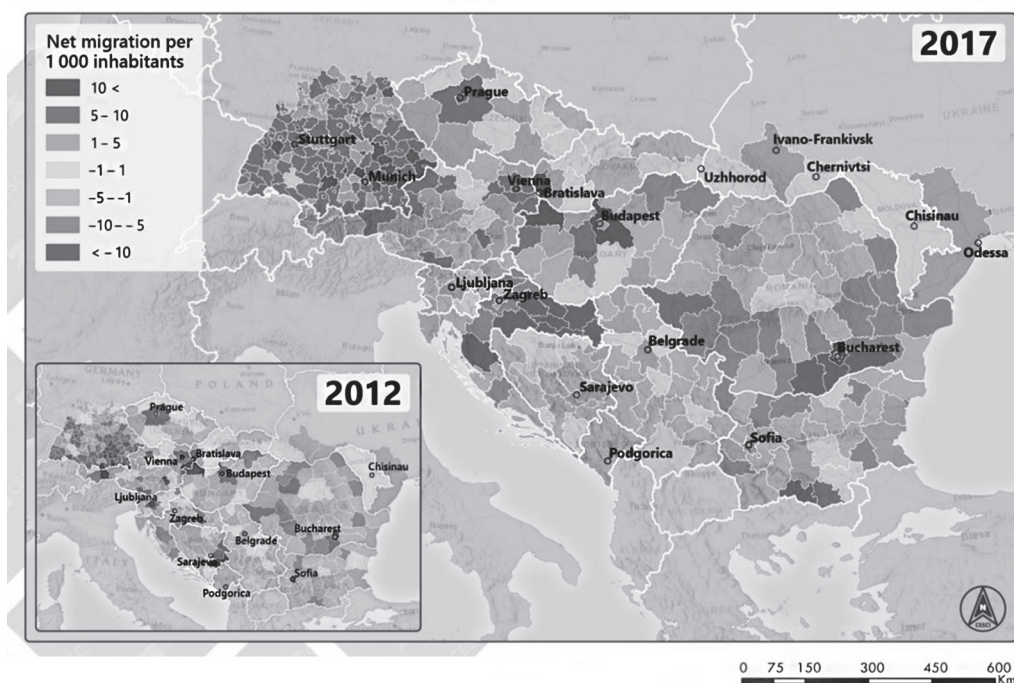


Figure 4: Spatial distribution of net migration in the Danube Region 2012 and 2017

Source: CESC 2019

The macro-regional strategies and especially the Danube or the Adriatic and Ionian strategies serve as important instruments of the neighbourhood and enlargement policy. Since the creation of the EUSDR, Croatia became an EU member state, while since 2023 all five countries outside the EU now have candidate member status. However, the rapid acceptance of the EU candidate status of Ukraine and Moldova in 2022 and the

protracted, stuttering enlargement process of the Western Balkans may cause resentment among many actors. In addition to the strengthening of EU skepticism, it can open space to other (e.g. Chinese) geopolitical aspirations. Since the outbreak of the war, the Three Seas Initiative, which was established in 2016 and is also supported by the U.S., aims to improve north–south connections along the border zone of the Russian sphere of interest. Meanwhile, the EUSDR has gradually lost political support in recent years. Multi-stakeholder collaborations and common projects resolve potentially rigid bilateral relations of interest, help the use of EU funds and speed up the accession of candidate countries to the EU through the harmonisation of EU law. Through their essential role in strengthening the economic and cultural relations between the countries, they can also deepen the common regional identity.³⁶

The future role of the Danube as a transport corridor is questionable, considering the effects of climate change and seeing the variable freight traffic data of recent years, which in Austria has halved in 15 years.³⁷ The expected increase in the frequency of low water periods, the costs and environmental effects of maintaining the fairway require the application of a complex approach. All of this also highlights the importance of fleet modernisation and the establishment of multimodal connections.

The Covid pandemic and the Russian–Ukrainian war resulted in the breakdown of traditional supply chains. In terms of the competitiveness and green transformation of the economy, there are significant opportunities for their reorganisation and the strengthening of small and medium-sized enterprises in the region, or even stopping emigration.

Hungary's interests with regard to the future development of the Danube macro-regional cooperation

Hungary actively participated in the creation and subsequent implementation of the Danube Strategy. In order to maintain her decisive role, it is advisable to strengthen the domestic political commitment to the Strategy as a first step. Furthermore, it is necessary to ensure the conditions for stronger support of the activities of domestic organisations that significantly contribute to the implementation of the strategy (e.g. leaders of working groups, thematic associations, transnational project chains).

During the 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency, the mid-term review of cohesion programs and the finalisation of the ninth Cohesion Report may determine the future of cohesion policy – and thus of the EUSDR. It can help refocus attention on the EUSDR ahead of the 2025 negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Perspective.

The operation of the Interreg Danube Region Program with its headquarters in Budapest is also of prime importance in the period after 2027, together with the national support for the preparation of strategically important EUSDR projects under Hungarian

³⁶ GORDOS 2011: 121; KOLLER 2011: 75–90; TÖRÖK–LENDVAI 2011: 33–43.

³⁷ CASPAR et al. 2023: 16–17.

leadership. Embedding the goals of the EUSDR during the implementation of national operational programs is essential, but from 2021 it is already necessary to go beyond the ex-post-labeling of projects.³⁸

In line with the Hungarian global water diplomacy and water industry aspirations, it is important to maintain and further strengthen our role at the Danube region level in the field of water management both in the priority areas of the Strategy and in the ICPDR expert groups. In connection with adaptation to climate change, it is advisable to direct the discourse in the direction of water resource management and water sharing issues. Enhancing cooperation in the Tisza basin should be given a priority role, further strengthening the national Tisza Office established in 2014 in Szolnok. It is necessary to support the development of Transcarpathia's water utility systems and municipal waste management with the tools of the Strategy in order to improve water quality of the Tisza basin and the living conditions of the Hungarian minority across the border. All of this requires a pool of well-prepared water and environmental management specialists that can prevail in an international environment.

With regard to the development of waterway transportation along the Danube, the statements made in the third Hungarian contribution compiled in 2010 regarding the consideration of costs, benefits and environmental aspects are still valid. Since then, we must pay even more special attention to the effects of climate change.

In addition to the Budapest-based EU Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL), the creation of a permanent Danube coordination centre for law enforcement would eliminate the security deficit, even in relation to the security aspects of external migration pressure affecting the Danube region.

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³⁸ OROSZI–JENEI 2016: 1–10.

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