

VISION PAPER

“Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region”

Background

In October 2015 the ministers in charge of EU funds, European Affairs and European Integration from the participating States and Regions of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) reinforced the need for a closer cooperation and coordination between European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and EU programmes on the one hand and the governance of the EUSDR on the other hand in their Joint Statement¹. In this spirit, the first meeting of ESF Managing Authorities (MA) in the Danube Region was organized on 28th of October 2015 as a side-event of the 4th Annual Forum of the EUSDR in Ulm. The aim of the meeting was to get in contact, to start a discussion in the sense of a brainstorming as well as to find out how and in which fields the ESF MAs and the EUSDR (especially the respective Priority Areas 9 “People and Skills” and 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”) could cooperate. So far, four network meetings have taken place and the next one will be in Sofia in October 2019.

In view of the upcoming funding period 2021-2027, the regulatory proposals of the European Commission further encourage to embed the Macro-Regional Strategies, like the EUSDR, in the ESIF programmes. The current preparation phase of the ESF Operational Programmes in the participating States and Regions of the EUSDR provides a unique opportunity to benefit as much as possible from each other.

Therefore, the overall objective of the Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region is to make both the ESF (European Social Fund) / ESF+ (European Social Fund Plus) and the EUSDR more efficient through the support of transnational cooperation to accelerate the transfer of, and the facilitation of scaling of innovative solutions, in particular for the areas of employment, skills and social inclusion, across the Danube Region.

Vision

Our vision is to find a common ground for ESF relevant policy proposals in order to develop and establish state of the art policies in labour market policy, governance and social inclusion that takes into account macro-regional dynamics and interdependencies in the Danube Region with competent and viable transnational partnerships.

Mission

The Network of ESF Managing Authorities in the Danube Region constitutes an informal platform to facilitate the exchange and the coordination between the ESF MAs in the Danube Region, the respective Priority Areas of the EUSDR and the European Commission.

¹[Joint Statement of the Ministers in charge of EU Funds, European Affairs and European Integration, 29/10/2015.](#)

Thereby, the network aims at:

- **Developing a common understanding** of the role of the EUSDR in relation to the ESF / ESF+;
- **Consolidating the network:** Enhancing Know-how-transfer and co-designing of a state of the art of social innovation; capitalising on and disseminating good practice out of project results and experiences;
- **Handling spill-over effects:** Curbing and/or managing negative spill over effects and increasing the positive impact through closer coordination;
- **Managing transnational cooperation:** Building a viable programme framework to manage transnational cooperation.

How to reach these aims?

- Coordination of the Network: Organizing 1-2 meetings per year and ongoing coordination/information via a common platform (by PA9 and 10 in coordination with MAs);
- Agreement on topics of cooperation (bi- or multilateral), e.g. coordinated calls, flagship projects (by MAs);
- Facilitating the transnational cooperation between project promoters in the Danube Region, e.g. partner search forum, peer reviews, good practice platform.

General Remarks: What is the EU Strategy for the Danube Region?

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is a policy framework for a better macro-regional cooperation and coordination of actions to enhance well-being in the entire Danube Region. Geographically, the EUSDR encompasses Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Romania as well as the non-EU member states Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia and Ukraine (Chernivetska Oblast, Ivano-Frankiviska Oblast, Zakarpatska Oblast and Odessa Oblast).

Stakeholders at all levels identified actions that:

- have a crucial impact on the quality of life;
- constitute key challenges for all or most regions in the area;
- show interdependencies throughout the Danube Region.

How is the EUSDR implemented?

The EUSDR seeks to facilitate the coordination and cooperation within formal and informal initiatives to make a better use of synergies and expertise, to align funding for greater impact and to contribute to integrated planning in the Danube Region.

Policy-makers, Managing Authorities, project promoters as well as other public and private stakeholders at all levels are encouraged to use the strategy for:

- building up macro-regional/transnational partnerships and networks;
- coordinating and co-creating policies across borders;
- facilitating transnational project development and implementation.

The EUSDR addresses a wide range of issues; these are divided among 4 pillars and 12 Priority Areas (PA). The relevant Priority Areas for the ESF/ESF+ are **Priority Area 9 “Investing in People and Skills”** and **Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation”**.

Activities of Priority Area 9 “Investing in People and Skills” focus on **cooperation** among institutions (e.g. small-scale partnerships and partnerships for excellence) and **support** to policy development (conferences; peer-learning, peer-counselling, studies and surveys etc.). The actions emphasis i.a. on the following topics:

- **Intensify cooperation in labour market policies:** e.g. active labour market policies, skills mismatch, transition from school to work;

- **Integration of vulnerable groups into the labour market:** e.g. case management, subsidies to keep up employment, social entrepreneurship;
- **Fighting poverty and promoting social inclusion for all:** e.g. integrated approaches, diversification of social services;
- **Quality and efficiency of education and training systems:** e.g. labour market relevance of skills, vocational education and training (VET), quality assurance mechanism;
- **Lifelong learning and learning mobility:** e.g. mobility of learners and teachers as well as partnerships among schools and educational institutions, LLL strategies.

In this respect, the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), supporting quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning, quality employment and social inclusion plays a key role in the context of the EUSDR.

At the same time, the quality of social policies is largely affected by the capacities of public administrations and respective public and private stakeholders, who are responsible for the design and implementation of policies and activities. Hence, Priority Area 10 “Institutional Capacity and Cooperation” promotes amongst other activities to contribute to the following actions:

- **Improving institutional capacities in order to provide high-quality public services:** e.g. needs-based public service provision, reducing administrative burdens, implementation of eGovernment systems;
- **Strengthening the involvement of civil society and local actors:** e.g. mainstreaming participatory governance of designing policies and measures; building capacities for state and non-state actors to engage in policy processes;
- **Facilitating the administrative cooperation of communities living in border regions:** e.g. developing joint cross-border public services; improving administrative coordination in border regions.

How does the ESF+ tackle challenges of social cohesion?

The ESF+ will focus on:

- **Support the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the implementation of recommendations under the European Semester**
The ESF+ will continue to tackle unemployment, poverty and exclusion, by supporting job seekers, the poor, marginalised and deprived people. The ESF+ will also remain the main EU instrument investing in policy and systems reforms to enhance the skills and education levels of people, including digital skills that would equip them for the changing labour market.
- **Provide a helping hand to youth**
Member States with a NEET rate above the Union average in 2019 will be required to dedicate a certain percentage of ESF+ allocations to targeted actions and structural reforms to support youth employment.
- **Foster social inclusion**
This will promote the social dimension of Europe as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).
- **Support EU actions for social innovation, mobility and health**
The ESF+ will offer the opportunity to test innovative solutions, will support labour mobility in Europe and will help to modernise health systems in the Member States.

What are the common topics between the EUSDR and the ESF+?

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) plays a central role in both the EUSDR and the ESF+. Based on the defined goals of the EPSR and the previous discussions in the network meetings, the following common topics for future cooperation within the Danube Region can be identified:

- Inclusion of vulnerable groups / Roma Inclusion
- Administrative Capacities - integrated approaches
- Youth, e.g. NEETS
- Digitalisation and eGovernment
- Lifelong Learning
- Long-term unemployed people
- Integration of 3rd country nationals
- Social entrepreneurship
- Upskilling Pathways
- Adaptability of employees and employers
- Working mobility
- Social housing