

## **Enhancing Regional Cooperation in the Danube Basin: EUSDR PA5 Consultation with EU Accession Countries Republic of Serbia**

### **Executive Summary**

The Danube River connects 19 countries and supports over 80 million people, serving as a lifeline for the region's ecosystems, economies, and cultures. However, growing environmental risks, intensified by climate change and socio-economic pressures, threaten this critical resource. Addressing these challenges requires innovative, cross-border solutions in water management, disaster resilience, and environmental protection. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) and its Environmental Risks Priority Area 5 (PA5) play a pivotal role in fostering such cooperation.

Hungary, in close collaboration with Romania, has spearheaded collaborative initiatives, such as the Danube Region Operative Flood Management and Cooperation Programme ([DR Oper&Cooper](#)) in 2015. These efforts have laid a strong foundation for addressing environmental risks, yet the past decade has seen increasing intensity, duration, and frequency of extreme weather events. Notable examples include devastating floods in 2002, 2006, 2013, and 2014, the severe ice event on the Danube in 2017, and the floods of 2024, which caused significant human and economic losses across the basin.

Despite progress, gaps persist in communication, coordination, and resource allocation, especially for EU accession countries. To bridge these gaps, Hungary, with the involvement of Romania, launched targeted consultations as part of the Environmental Risks Priority Area. The first consultation, held on November 27-28, 2024, in Belgrade, Serbia, convened representatives from the European Commission, EU Danube Strategy Point, and Serbian institutions such as the Republic Hydrometeorological Service of Serbia, the Secretariat for Environmental Protection of the City of Belgrade, the University of Novi Sad, and the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Belgrade. Key contributors also included the Sector for Emergency Management of the Ministry of the Interior, the Firefighter Association of Serbia, and research organizations like the Jaroslav Černi Water Institute. This diverse assembly addressed pressing challenges in water management, flood protection, and disaster preparedness.

The Environmental Risks Priority Area has achieved significant milestones, including hands-on flood management training through DAREX 2019 and international collaboration in the Danube Rope Rescue Contests (2023, 2024). Key advancements also include promoting nature-based solutions for sustainable flood risk management and enhancing regional flood forecasting through the Danube Forecasting Forum (DAFF) 2023.

The Belgrade consultation underscored the importance of knowledge-sharing, partnerships, and best practices to strengthen cooperation within the Danube Region. Participants identified actionable solutions and explored potential projects to enhance resilience across the macro-region.

**Call to Action:**

EU Strategy for the Danube Region Environmental Risks Priority Area has launched a targeted action plan to better engage non-EU Danube countries, focusing on practical solutions for flood risks and public awareness campaigns. The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, holding the EUSDR Presidency in 2025, presents an opportunity to further these collaborative efforts. A similar consultation is planned for spring 2025 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with additional initiatives targeting other EU accession countries in the near future. Stakeholders are invited to engage in these consultations and contribute their expertise to drive actionable solutions, fostering a resilient and integrated future for the Danube Basin.

## Detailed Summary

### Welcoming Remarks and General Framework

The event commenced with welcoming remarks from Mr. László Balatonyi, the Hungarian Priority Area Coordinator of the Environmental Risks Priority Area (PA5), who introduced his team and Romanian partners. Mr. Balatonyi highlighted the achievements of PA5 in fostering regional cooperation, particularly its success in implementing over 50 projects tackling environmental risks such as climate change, floods, and accidental pollution. He underscored Hungary's leadership in enhancing disaster resilience and integrating non-EU countries into macro-regional strategies. Mr. Johan Magnusson (DG REGIO) followed, expressing support for PA5's mission and its focus on candidate countries. He emphasized the significance of supporting the EU enlargement process and preparing Serbia for future integration.

Cristina Cuc (Danube Strategy Point) provided an overview of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) and the activities of the Danube Strategy Point. She emphasized the collaborative framework of EUSDR, uniting 9 EU Member States and 5 accession countries to address cross-border challenges like floods, droughts, and water pollution. Ms. Cuc highlighted EUSDR's transformative role in fostering trust, embedding priorities into EU programs, and preparing non-EU countries for integration. She noted Serbia's coordination roles in PA 1/b (Rail-Road-Air Mobility) and PA 7 (Knowledge Society).

### Disaster Management Working Group Presentation

Mr. Zsolt Kelemen, Chair of the Disaster Management Working Group (DMWG) of PA5, introduced the group's objectives and highlighted its establishment by Hungary in 2019 with support from all Danube countries. He showcased the e-learning platform featuring multilingual disaster management resources to standardize knowledge and foster cooperation across civil protection professionals in the Danube Region.

Specific initiatives included the hybrid trailer project, enhancing operational mobility in remote areas for firefighters, and MobilApp, which aids disaster response coordination through real-time communication and resource allocation. Additionally, Mr. Kelemen discussed the international response to the recent earthquake in Turkey, emphasizing the importance of cross-border collaboration among first responders. The Turkey earthquake response demonstrated the effectiveness of coordinated efforts and highlighted the need for continuous training and technology upgrades.

### Danube Youth Council Presentation

Ana Sabanovic, a Serbian representative of the Danube Youth Council, addressed challenges like brain drain and the importance of youth engagement in EUSDR initiatives. She emphasized the institutional involvement of young people in EUSDR governance structures, with 28 members (two from each Danube Region country) actively contributing to thematic projects like PA5 and events such as the Alpine Rivers Symposium 2024. Ms. Sabanovic underscored the council's efforts in promoting regional sustainability, innovation, and the inclusion of youth perspectives in macro-regional strategies.

## World Café Forum: Water Management

The World Café Forum fostered stakeholder discussions on gaps and needs in water and disaster management.

- **Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) for Flood Risk Reduction:** Participants explored implementing NBS, identifying barriers like complex permitting systems and low public awareness. Proposed strategies included maintaining urban wet gardens and wetlands, with Global Water Partnership offering models of successful practices in Hungary. SPONGECITY and potential LIFE project funding were highlighted as collaboration opportunities. The takeaways emphasized engaging municipalities, educating the public, and leveraging international funding opportunities.
- **Flood Forecasting and Modeling:** Discussions emphasized accessible forecasting models and robust river basin frameworks. SavaFFWS (Flood Forecasting and warning System) forecasting platform implemented under the auspices of ISRBC and all 5 countries in the Sava River basin was cited as a reference. Challenges in funding were noted, with Horizon projects proposed as solutions. Plans included initiating pilot projects, utilizing Slovakia's upcoming ICPDR presidency, and promoting joint water management plans involving public and private sectors.
- **Public Awareness and Engagement:** Participants stressed the lack of public awareness and suggested solutions like parent education programs, open days, and NGO collaborations. Investing in communication tools and experts was also proposed to enhance public engagement. Cristina Cuc's call for participative approaches and funding readiness aligns with these recommendations. Takeaways highlighted creating videos and collaborating with media and NGOs for broader outreach.

## World Café Forum: Disaster Management

The second day focused on disaster management, highlighting cooperation and equipment standardization.

- **Collaboration between Governmental and Non-Governmental Organizations:** Discussions covered gaps in municipal support for volunteer firefighters. Solutions included improving volunteer conditions and enhancing equipment with local government support.
- **Standards and Training for International Response:** Participants identified gaps in training and equipment for volunteers. The PA5 team proposed inviting Serbian observers to the SAFETY4TMF project and sharing harmonized training protocols. Future priorities included joint exercises and collaboration with forestry organizations.
- **Cross-Border Program Proposals:** Bojan Tubic from Serbia presented the STOPFIRES Project, aiming to improve environmental resilience in cross-border protected areas. PA5 encouraged developing new proposals to support international exercises and acquire essential equipment.

## Key Achievements of EU Strategy for the Danube Region Environmental Risks Priority Area:

- **DAREX 2019:** Enhanced disaster response with hands-on flood management training for over 300 professionals. [Watch highlights](#)

- **Danube Rope Rescue Contests (2023, 2024):** Fostered international cooperation and readiness through skill exchanges. [Watch highlights](#)
- **Nature-Based Solutions (NBS):** Workshops advanced sustainable water management strategies. [Learn more](#)
- **Danube Forecasting Forum (DAFF) 2023:** Improved flood forecasting through innovative data sharing and modeling. [Learn more](#)

**Call to Action:**

A robust action plan under EU Strategy for the Danube Region Environmental Risks Priority Area aims to strengthen non-EU Danube country participation through focused initiatives. Key priorities include promoting urban nature-based solutions, creating accessible flood forecasting models, and increasing public engagement via educational campaigns and partnerships. These initiatives lay the groundwork for sustainable and inclusive environmental risk management across the region. With Bosnia and Herzegovina holding the EUSDR Presidency in 2025, a similar consultation is planned for spring 2025. This mission will align with EUSDR objectives and support EU accession countries. Further initiatives in other accession countries are being developed to strengthen regional cooperation and inclusivity in addressing environmental risks in the Danube Basin.

*This Report was prepared by László Balatonyi on behalf of the PA5 HU team, as the organizer of the EU Accession Countries meeting held in the Republic of Serbia.*

*This document was reviewed and formally adopted by all participants on 24 January 2025 in Budapest.*

**Interreg  
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## Annex: Action plan for strengthening SG capacities and performance by developing a workplan for the better involvement of non-EU Danube countries (D.1.4.1.)

### 1. Advancing Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) in Urban Areas

The adoption of nature-based solutions (NBS), such as urban wetlands and wet gardens, is a practical approach to addressing flashfloods, especially in –hilly, low hilly – urban areas. However, challenges such as complex water permitting processes, special maintains activities and insufficient public awareness hinder implementation. Sharing successful examples and fostering collaboration across municipalities can significantly enhance the uptake of these solutions.

- **Action:** Facilitate workshops and public education campaigns to promote NBS and already identified challenges.
- **Responsible Organization<sup>1</sup>:** EUSDR PA5. The institutions responsible for the implementation of flood defense measures are the Public Water Management Companies Vode Vojvodina, Srbijavode and Beogradvode, with the coordination of the Republic Directorate for Water. During the planning phase, any further responsible organizations and partners must be clearly defined.
- **Contributing Organizations<sup>2</sup>:** Secretariat for Environmental Protection of the City of Belgrade and during the planning phase, any further responsible organizations and partners must be clearly defined.
- **Deadline:** 31<sup>st</sup> December 2028.
- **Output Indicator:** Workshops organized, pilot projects elaboration and implementation

### 2. Strengthening Flood Forecasting and Modeling

Improving flood forecasting requires translating model results into formats accessible to the public and enhancing cooperation with hydropower companies and Civil Protection agencies. While the SavaFFWS platform offers a good foundation, a comprehensive model for downstream Danube countries is essential for more effective flood preparedness.

- **Action:** Facilitate workshops, summary on the recent status, defining further action
- **Responsible Organization<sup>2</sup>:** EUSDR PA5, Republic Hydrometeorological Service of Serbia, and during the planning phase, any further responsible organizations and partners must be clearly defined.
- **Contributing Organizations:** Republic Directorate for Water, Public Water Management Companies Vode Vojvodina, Srbijavode and Beogradvode and during the planning phase, any further responsible organizations and partners must be clearly defined.
- **Deadline:** 31<sup>st</sup> December 2028.

<sup>1</sup> This list includes organizations proposed by other stakeholders during the consultation process as potentially responsible or contributing entities. These suggestions have not been formally confirmed by the proposed organizations and are included here to facilitate further discussions and collaboration.

<sup>2</sup> This list is based on inputs provided directly by the participating organizations, reflecting their own selection of roles and responsibilities. In some cases, these roles have not been formally confirmed by the respective entities and are included here for reference purposes only.

- **Output Indicator:** Facilitate workshop organization, summary on the recent status, defining further action

### 3. Enhancing Public Awareness and Engagement

Public awareness campaigns are often constrained by limited funding and challenges in sustaining interest. Simplifying technical reports into accessible videos and infographics, coupled with community events, can effectively engage the public. Partnerships with NGOs and media platforms will amplify these outreach efforts.

- **Action:** Translate technical water management reports into engaging videos and infographics and collaborate with NGOs for community events and campaigns
- **Responsible Organization:** EUSDR PA5 and during the planning phase, any further responsible organizations and partners must be clearly defined.
- **Contributing Organizations:** During the planning phase, any further responsible organizations and partners must be clearly defined.
- **Deadline:** 31<sup>st</sup> December 2028.
- **Output Indicator:** Communication material

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