



Danube-INCO.NET

**Advancing Research and Innovation
in the Danube Region**

**Transnational cooperation of national programmes
and research infrastructures in the Danube region**

Policy recommendations

**Danube Policy Dialogue
on the European Research Area and the Innovation Union**



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Context

The Danube-INCO.NET project is a strategic high-level coordination and support action facilitating the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) and its Priority Areas Knowledge Society (PA7) and Competitiveness (PA8).

The bi-regional dialogue facilitated by the project is a core activity geared towards exchanging views between policy-makers and relevant stakeholders from EU Member States and non-EU Member States on key aspects of R&I policy, thus identifying common ground and developing a shared vision for future action. This is done inter alia through presenting and discussing the 'Innovation Union' (IU) and the European Research Area (ERA) Framework concepts and targets in a series of three workshops held in different non-EU Member States, i.e. Serbia, Ukraine and Moldova. Each workshop focuses on a coherent set of topics related to ERA priorities and IU commitments that are particularly relevant for the countries hosting the workshops and the non-EU Member States at large. Based on the outcome of a survey among all Danube-INCO.NET partners on the scope of the dialogue on "Innovation Union and ERA in the Danube Region", the first workshop in Belgrade addressed the subject area "Optimal transnational co-operation and competition: Jointly addressing grand challenges" (ERA Priority 2), including through the "Joint establishment, operation and transnational use of national and European research infrastructures" (IU Commitment 5). The topic involves efforts to implementing joint research agendas addressing grand challenges, sharing information about activities in common priority areas, and ensuring that adequate national funding is committed and mutually interoperable.

The outcomes of the workshop are summarized below in a set of recommendations that are deemed pivotal and likely to be implemented in the countries in a medium-term perspective. The recommendations are shared among all participants and considered to hold significance across the entire Danube region.

Policy recommendations

Joint priority-setting and implementing strategic research agendas

1. Enhance political will for common priority-setting

The political will to maintain and increase public investments in research and innovation over the decade in a sustainable manner, even in times of austerity, remains a major challenge. Within the field of science and research the EU Strategy for the Danube Region has so far generated a number of relevant bottom-up projects covering a wide variety of issues (from e.g. water management to dual education). What is, however, missing is a *more streamlined, strategic approach to common research issues relevant for and specific to the Danube Region*. Such an enhanced strategic approach does not need to start from scratch but can build on work already done in this respect:

- a. national/regional strategies that often also include an international dimension for co-operation,
- b. many – if not all – countries and regions along the Danube river have also developed smart specialization strategies, which can provide a basis for joint programmes in matching priority areas and building on close ties between countries where collaborative linkages are already strong (e.g. within the Research Framework Programme 7),
- c. currently, a number of projects and initiatives have been – or are in the process of – assessing such options for joint action (Ulm process, Joint Research Center “Nexus-activities”¹, Danube-INCO.NET², specific thematic projects like DANCERS³, DREAM⁴, DANUBIUS⁵; the DANUBE Transnational Programme⁶; Eye@RIS⁷ of the Smart Specialisation Platform, Western Balkans Regional R&D Strategy for Innovation⁸).

Beyond funding research co-operation in thematic topics, *national and international programmes should support horizontal and cross-cutting aspects of R&I policy* through targeted joint actions, including, inter alia, science-business cooperation, researcher career development, and mobility of researchers (scholarships, fellowships). When getting engaged in joint actions between countries, particular attention must be given to the varied cultural conditions in which each country operates, taking account of the way decisions are reached (“politics of place”) and funds are administered.

Within the context of a comprehensive strategy - like the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)⁹ - , specific sub-strategies are well-suited to meet the specific demands of certain regions and in specific thematic areas, thus providing a sound basis for bottom-up or thematically oriented calls and joint actions. Such a “*hierarchy of strategies*” would provide a clear vision and avoid activities that are incoherent, overlapping and in a worst case competing for the same financial

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/research/crosscutting-activities/danube-strategy>

² <http://danube-inco.net/>

³ <http://www.dancers-fp7.eu/>

⁴ http://www.codcr.com/images/events/participant/2012-03-22/Danube_River_Research_And_Management_-_DREAM.pdf

⁵ <http://www.danubius-ri.eu/>

⁶ <http://www.southeast-europe.net/en/about/see/danubeprogramme/index>

⁷ <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/eye-ris3>

⁸ <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/eca/WBRIS%20Strategy10-21-13%20web.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.danube-region.eu/>

resources. Therefore, synergy between different funding opportunities is desirable, creating a policy mix characterised by a clear division of tasks and functional complementarity.

2. Pursue an incremental approach in R&I cooperation in the Danube region

Transnational funding of research and innovation projects can be a complex issue involving different national funding sources, rules and implementation practices. An incremental approach, by which partners would intensify their cooperation step-by-step, may be the most promising way to overcoming barriers for cooperation. These phases could comprise, for example; mobility schemes and exchange visits for individual domestic researchers (one by one); collaboration between institutions (and national funding bodies) in joint funding activities; opening up national programmes for foreign researchers/institutions. The implementation of pilot calls should be envisaged for specific purposes selected by the (two or more) partners, while making use of experiences gathered in cross-border collaboration projects, such as; SEE-ERA.Net¹⁰, Ulm-Follow-up Group¹¹, or the Hungarian-German (NIH-BMBF) call¹².

3. Identify the added value of cooperation for your researchers / research system

Before engaging in those activities it is important for each region/country to identify the tangible added value deriving from a specific joint activity in the Danube Region in order to get the best results from that co-operation. Here the approach of variable geometry is key – not all countries have to join all activities but should join those that have an added value for them. In such a system, one country may take the initiative by proposing a topic/call, while other interested countries would subscribe to it, as far as it is of relevance.

Harmonisation and synchronisation of funding

4. Address problems of technical compatibility of national or regional research and funding systems

When preparing for joint initiatives (e.g. a call for research projects), implementation barriers are often caused by (in-) compatible timelines in terms of budgeting (reserving national funds for joint actions), and by the different rules governing the respective funding sources. The development of (longer-term) research agendas (see point 1 priority setting) may in this context be an effective way to facilitate the timely budgeting of national sources! Concerning compatibility, the new legal frameworks for EU policy instruments supporting R&I, i.e. the regulations for Horizon 2020 and those for the EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), have moved towards more interoperability¹³ and should be observed, both in terms of opening up additional funding opportunities as well as providing a model for coordinating national activities (e.g. using lump sums).

¹⁰ <http://www.see-era.net/>

¹¹ http://danube-inco.net/object/news/13792/attach/2nd_meeting_ULM_FOLLOW_UP_BMBF.pdf

¹² For more information see <http://www.internationales-buero.de/en/1029.php>

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/guides/synergy/synergies_en.pdf

Synergies within the policy mix

5. Explore the opportunities of using IPA (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) and ENPI (European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument) funds for R&D co-operation

In analogy to the synergies being promoted between Horizon 2020 and the ESIF for EU member states (see 4.), opportunities of using IPA/ENPI for R&I measures hence creating operational links between funds in non-EU states should as well be exploited. However, since these opportunities are rather new, and knowledge and skills therefore scattered, they should be explored more systematically. To seize such opportunities, the political will is needed by decision makers and programming bodies to prioritise R&D co-operation in spending these funds. IPA or ENPI funds could, for example, be used for capacity-building activities, for creating awareness of and increasing participation in Horizon 2020, or to support the set-up of ERA-Net-like administrative structures (call preparation, implementation etc.).

6. Provide operational support to R&D projects

Researchers preparing transnational research collaboration projects need support in various forms, most importantly including:

- a. transparent information about funding opportunities at national and EU level (“signposting” via e.g. the Danube-INCO.NET Website), and
- b. access to proactive support services (e.g. helpdesk, national contact points) providing assistance on the administrative and financial implementation of operations, particularly when funding sources are combined (Horizon 2020, ESIF, IPA/ENPI, national funds...).

Transnational cooperation of research infrastructures

7. Place research infrastructure development in the Danube region in an appropriate context

When developing new or upgrading existing research infrastructures at national level, these efforts should be embedded in overarching concepts in order to enhance complementarity between the facilities but avoid their duplication or unproductive competition. Such concepts may be created at different levels, depending on the individual scope and scale of outreach and impact:

- a. At national level, e.g. in a national research infrastructure roadmap process,
- b. At transnational or international level, e.g. taking into consideration macro-regional strategies or initiatives (i.e. drawing on European Investment Bank studies - recognised by the international community for its contribution to the ERA) or European initiatives (e.g. European Strategy Forum for Research Infrastructures).

8. Make use of Horizon 2020 for developing and enhancing Danube Region research capacity

Within the Horizon 2020 work programme for research infrastructures, there are specific opportunities dedicated not only to developing research infrastructures but also – for example – to integrating and opening up existing national and regional research infrastructures of European interest to new users, e-Infrastructure for Open Access, new professions and skills for e-infrastructures, and international cooperation for research infrastructures. This broad range of activity should be exploited as much as possible particularly in the non-EU member states associated to Horizon 2020, in order to mobilise new (private) actors and unlock a new dynamic of research and innovation.

Likewise, the actions funded to spreading excellence and widening participation in European R&I (Teaming, Twinning, ERA Chairs) should be exploited particularly to link actors in the Danube region, access excellent R&I networks and improve research capacities.

9. Explore and support stronger links between science and industry also with a view to research infrastructure

High quality research facilities and infrastructures are attractive not only to researchers in the academic field. In many – even traditional – industries, companies (including SME's) might have a considerable demand for using and accessing such – often unique – facilities, enabling them to in-source knowledge and sometimes short-cut the innovation process from fundamental research to new marketable solutions. Initiatives and projects to open-up infrastructures like ScienceLink¹⁴ could serve as models to bring together those different actors and institutions and make best use of the available resources.

Belgrade, 10 July 2014

¹⁴ <http://www.science-link.eu/>