
EU Strategy for the Danube Region
Priority Area 1a – To improve mobility and multimodality: Inland waterways

**24th Meeting of the Steering Group of
Priority Area 1a of the EUSDR**
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MINUTES

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1. PA 1a Welcome and introduction

The 24th Steering Group meeting of the Danube Region Strategy's Priority Area 1a – *To improve mobility and multimodality: Inland waterways* was held in a hybrid setting in Vienna (Austria) on 16th May 2024. The meeting was chaired by AT-PAC Markus Simoner and - on behalf of the Romanian PAC- Romeo Soare (AFDJ).

2. Tour de table

All participants shortly introduced themselves, followed by short introductions of current or planned initiatives in every country.

Bosnia and Hercegovina (Ms. Snežana Hadžić)

In Bosnia and Hercegovina two main activities concerning the Sava River fairway are ongoing. The first is the maintenance of the fairway signalling system, which is outdated and managed through a bilateral agreement between Bosnia and Hercegovina and Croatia. This maintenance is secured under a three-year framework agreement valued at €350,000. The second activity involves the demining of the left bank of the Sava River, primarily on the land side. A previous demining initiative from 2012-2014 was unsuccessful, but a new effort is set to commence with World Bank financing. This project, which aims to investigate and clear 85 locations, is expected to start early next year and conclude by the end of 2026. The demining is a prerequisite for the rehabilitation of the waterway. Additionally, Bosnia and Hercegovina has received €37 million from the World Bank for flood protection measures.

Bulgaria (Mr. Bozhidar Yankov)

Bulgaria's focus remains on the daily routine of maintaining the fairway, including dredging and marking activities, such as realignment of the fairway. Currently, dredging is concentrated in the Vardim area. This effort is supported by a framework contract and Bulgaria's own dredging equipment. The recently started CEF co-financed project "FAIRway Danube 2" project involves a multibeam upgrade of a surveying vessel, the public tender process already started, and the contract will be signed shortly. There is a recognized need for a better Waterway Monitoring System (WAMS) concept, a common platform for managing the signalisation on the BG-RO Danube stretch will be addressed in the "DISMAR" project aimed at improving signalling. Additionally, Bulgaria plans to introduce another self-propelled suction dredger.

Romania (Mr. Romeo Soare, Ms. Moren Abdurafi)

Romania is currently primarily focused on maintaining the Danube, having dredged 300,000 m³ so far in 2024, with upcoming dredging planned in Cochirleni. The flow discharge is currently low, at 60% of the average, which indicates rather unfavourable fairway conditions. Port infrastructure updates are ongoing, particularly in Constanza. For the "FAST Danube 2" project, a funding application was submitted to CEF in January 2024. The rehabilitation and reconstruction of Calarasi-Braila is progressing. The Sulina Canal's bank protection needs upgrading, the project will hopefully start in 2025. Romania, along with Bulgaria, is part of the "DISMAR" project, which received €10 million funding for integrating a new marking system (floating and coastal signalisation) and IT platform with a connection to the RIS systems. A national financing scheme for port infrastructure modernization has been launched by the Ministry of Transport dedicated for private port operators, deadline for applications is 25th June 2024.

Additionally, ACN reported the finalization of modernizing locks and the start of modernizing the Novodari locks soon. Bank protection is the most important project at the moment, with one year allocated for technical design and five years for works. The modernization of port facilities in Luminita and Ovidiu, along with other ports, is ongoing. The "FAIRway Danube 2" project includes modernizing mooring places at the Canals and acquiring a new surveying vessel equipped with multibeam

technology. The “COMEX 2” project aims to modernize the AIS system and a feasibility study for the rearrangement of the Danube-Bucharest Canal is expected to have its final version by mid-2025.

Serbia (Mr. Ljubisa Mihajlović)

Serbia is currently handling multiple projects along the Danube, many of which are either ongoing or near completion. These projects receive funding from various sources, including the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), state funds, and EIB loans. A significant project is the common HR/RS CEF co-financed project “Preparing FAIRway 2 works”, where the procurement process for modelling activities (17 critical sectors) is still ongoing, with the contract expected to be signed by the end of May 2024. The country is monitoring and maintaining six (former) bottlenecks on the solely Serbian Danube stretch, regular maintenance measures ensure that the current status remains stable. The rehabilitation of the Iron Gate I lock has been finalized, the Iron Gate II lock is still being rehabilitated. and the procurement process for a new marking and hydrographic vessel is underway (in the framework of the CEF co-financed project “FAIRway works!”). New hardware and software are being integrated as part of a project in collaboration with the EIB, and AtoNs on the Sava River are scheduled to be finalized by mid-2024. Since 2020 a project for the removal of sunken vessels and UXO at Prahovo is ongoing.

Croatia (Ms. Lidija Hubalek)

Croatia reported on three projects, including the completion of three groynes in September 2023 and the expected finalization of the Opatovac winter shelter by summer 2024. The marking system project, involving marking vessels and AtoNs for the Sava and Drava rivers, is set to be finalized in January 2025. Monitoring of the joint RS/HR section will be completed by July 2024. Croatia plans to apply for the upcoming CEF call in October, potentially in collaboration with Bosnia and Herzegovina, for upgrading the Sava River. Annual marking activities cost around €100,000, due to a malfunction of the new Danube marking vessel, the marking vessel for the Drava is currently in operation on the Danube.

Slovakia (Mr. Adrian Augustin)

Slovakia is conducting a feasibility study to ensure full navigation on the Danube on the sector upstream the Gabčíkovo locks, designing alternative technical solutions for maintenance, an application for funding from CEF was rejected. The administration is awaiting a call from the national funding program. Additionally, Slovakia is preparing a project for the Váh-Oder waterway connection and is exploring financing options. The Bratislava and Komárno ports are set for upgrades, with feasibility studies ongoing to modernize their infrastructure and systems.

Austria (Mr. Markus Simoner)

Austria coordinates the “FAIRway Danube 2”, “FAIRway works!” and “Preparing FAIRway 2 works” projects (all CEF co-financed) with partners across the Danube region. Recent upgrades include the mooring place in Linz. Preparations for the low water season, expected in late summer 2024, involve dredging activities, the first pilots for flexible infrastructure elements will then be tested on one bottleneck. Austria emphasizes the need for new approaches in river engineering to address challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and extreme weather events, advocating for more flexibility in projects.

3. Danube Ministerial Conclusions – Recap (Ms. Viktoria Weissenburger)

The 6th Danube Ministerial Conclusions mark a significant milestone in the ongoing efforts to enhance connectivity and infrastructure development along the Danube River. On 4th April 2024, the Danube Ministers of Transport have – in the framework of the Connecting Europe Days in Brussels and upon invitation of EU Transport Commissioner Ms Adina Vălean – reaffirmed their commitment to improve

framework conditions for Danube navigation, especially related to effective waterway infrastructure rehabilitation and maintenance on the Danube and its navigable tributaries. The signing of the Conclusions happened in a written procedure on beforehand due to organisational reasons. Despite procedural issues leading to the non-signing by Bosnia and Hercegovina and Hungary, the majority of Danube riparian countries have pledged their commitment to the objectives outlined in these Conclusions. Central is the emphasis on the Fairway Masterplan, initially drafted in 2014 and updated in 2022. The masterplan serves as a blueprint for optimizing navigation infrastructure and streamlining operations along the Danube River. By reaffirming their commitment to the Fairway Masterplan, signatory countries acknowledge the importance of coordinated efforts in realizing the region's economic potential.

One of the paramount aspects of the Conclusions is their role in keeping the Danube region's development agenda firmly on the political radar. Through the mechanism of the National Action Plans, which monitor the national maintenance and rehabilitation measures every year, the progress is tracked. While the Conclusions may not offer immediate solutions to all challenges, they undoubtedly elevate the profile of Danube infrastructure issues and catalyse discussions within governmental circles.

Thanks were expressed to all contributors.

The whole document is published on the website (<https://navigation.danube-region.eu/setting-course-for-tomorrow-strengthening-danube-infrastructure-for-european-connectivity/>).

4. Update on navigability conditions 2023 and planned measures (Ms. Viktoria Weissenburger)

Austria (AT):

In 2023, Austria experienced 32 days below the fairway depth of 2.5m during the low-water season in October and early November.

Slovakia (SK):

In 2023, Slovakia conducted 108 surveying tours and weekly marking tours. Two dredging interventions, costing 2.9 million EUR, were carried out on the Danube upstream of Gabčíkovo, addressing one of the most limiting sectors with 89 days below the fairway depth of 2.5m. However, despite dredging efforts in two locations over several months, progress was slow due to the difficulty of removing sediment. Thus, critical locations in Slovakia are at the moment heavily reliant on water discharge.

Hungary (HU):

In 2023, Hungary's Danube sectors experienced similarly around 80 days below the fairway depth of 2.5m. While surveying was conducted once and marking tours are executed on a regular basis, dredging activities were not executed and in many critical locations (rocky bottom) not feasible, leaving them dependent on water discharge.

Croatia:

Twenty surveying tours were conducted on the Danube, along with over 90 marking tours. Dredging was conducted on the Danube, Sava and Drava rivers. Despite regulation efforts in certain areas, Mohovo remains a critical location due to its rocky bottom.

Romania:

In the lower Danube sector, Romania conducted 148 surveying tours and over 40 marking tours in 2023. Twenty-eight dredging interventions, totalling 1,181,038 m³ on the river Danube and 351,778 m³ on maritime Danube, were carried out, costing 8.4 million EUR. Critical depths below 2.5m were encountered for 37 days in the most critical location, Cochirleni.

Bulgaria:

Bulgaria conducted over 60 surveying tours with MB equipment and implemented 14 changes to the fairway course. Eight dredging interventions, including 2x in Belene and 2x in Vardim, were conducted, costing 2.5 million EUR. Additionally, 42 updates of Electronic Navigational Charts (ENCs) and 183 bottleneck plots were published. Maintenance dredging had to be rescheduled due to one grounding incident in 2023, emphasizing the importance of adherence of all players to traffic regulations.

5. Report on Joint DC/PA1a Workshop 28.02.2024

Back-to-back with the Danube Commission Expert Meeting on Hydraulic Engineering (EM HYD) on 29th February 2024, a workshop with significant involvement and participation from the shipping industry was held. The workshop focused on two case studies: the Middle Danube (Hungary) and the Lower Danube (Romania and Bulgaria) and on the utilisation of the river information systems by the companies.

Key Conclusions:

1. The shipping sector demonstrated a high level of understanding regarding restrictive traffic regulations and emphasized the importance of promptly publishing these regulations.
2. Providing up-to-date bathymetric information is crucial for informed loading decisions and safe navigation along the Danube.
3. Strong involvement and participation of sector representatives underscored the collaborative approach to addressing challenges in the shipping industry.

Discussion Points:

Shipping industry stakeholders acknowledged and respected traffic restrictions, emphasizing the need for all parties to adhere to regulations. The provision of accurate bathymetric data was highlighted as essential, underscoring the importance of timely information dissemination to users.

Participants suggested maintaining this workshop format annually, preferably early in the year, in conjunction with the Danube Commission's Expert Group Meeting.

Herfried Leitner commended the efforts of Romania and Bulgaria in their work on the Danube. Still, he noted, that customers often couldn't benefit from these improvements due to volume being bundled on the Ukrainian Danube stretch.

Robert Rafael proposed improving communication channels with customers, emphasizing the responsibility of fairway managers to provide technical details to the shipping industry in time. He also highlighted the importance of distributing global information and encouraged stakeholders to continue sharing updates with Pro Danube International for dissemination to their members.

Romeo Soare reported that a common IT platform was established between Ukraine, Moldova and Romania for traffic management on the maritime Danube, although no official trilateral agreement exists. The platform is working though.

Regarding crew regulations, it was noted that Ukraine's implementation of EU laws for adopting „Directive (EU) 2017/2397 on the recognition of professional qualifications in inland navigation“ is expected to be finalized by 2025.

6. Update on the revised TEN-T Regulation (Mr. Gert-Jan Muilerman)

The revised TEN-T Regulation, adopted by the European Parliament Plenary on 24th April will entry into force in May 2024, mandating Member States to ensure compliance by 31st December 2030. Key provisions include minimum navigable channel depths and bridge heights, based on reference water

levels, being a significant change to the initial requirement for a consistent 2.5-meter draught year-round. The Commission will issue implementing acts specifying reference levels per corridor/waterway section.

A webinar on implementing acts for members of Inland Navigation Europe is scheduled for 10th June 2024, to discuss these acts together with the Commission. Member States have flexibility in defining water parameters, and updates have been made to the corridor, including the inclusion of the Ukrainian part.

7. Update on the Joint Statement Review process (Ms. Jasna Muskatirovic)

During last September's Joint Statement meeting, the update process was kicked off. Tendering has been prepared, with funding secured through the Sava River's World Bank contract. Consultants are expected to come on board within the next few weeks, with the project planned to run for 14 months. First detailed information is anticipated by the Autumn JS Meeting.

Markus Simoner questioned the focus of the new Joint Statement process - will it be manual focused or a multidisciplinary and inclusive process as originally planned? He expressed concern that it would just be the same as before - tailored to projects rather than management.

Challenges arise as the new river basin management plan hasn't yet received approval for all countries by ICPDR, hindering project initiation. This question will be investigated and the situation clarified.

Gert-Jan Muilerman/PA1a offered support the review of the JS process upon request from the commissions.

Romeo Soare emphasized the need for improved cooperation between waterway administrations, transport ministries and various environmental bodies. Markus Simoner raised the question of how PA1a can contribute to this. Romeo Soare proposed its inclusion in the agenda for the next Steering Group meeting. Gert-Jan Muilerman agreed.

8. Recap Danube Business Talks (Mr. Gert-Jan Muilerman)

The Danube Business Talks, held on 15th May 2024, focused on three main themes: green navigation, good navigation status, and the future of crews. Discussions revolved around sustainable practices for navigating the Danube, including the use of alternative fuels and eco-friendly technologies to reduce environmental impact. Participants also explored strategies to enhance navigation efficiency and safety along the river. Additionally, the event addressed the evolving needs for qualified personnel in the shipping sector, considering factors such as training and workforce development. The Danube Business Dating platform provided attendees with opportunities to network and foster collaborations within the industry. Overall, the event served as a platform for stakeholders to exchange ideas and insights aimed at promoting sustainable and efficient navigation on the Danube River.

[News article Danube Business Talks 2024](#)

9. Main results of Austrian shippers' interviews in spring 2024 (Mr. Gert-Jan Muilerman)

viadonau's Transport Development team conducted in-depth interviews with the six largest shipping companies operating on the Austrian Danube, responsible for nearly 100% of the cargo transported on the Austrian Danube stretch. Discussions covered various topics, including the impacts of low water levels. Shippers highlighted concerns regarding infrastructure quality and reliability along the Main-Danube axis, particularly for westbound transport. They also noted significant additional operational costs due to low water, amounting to several million Euros annually. A common operational adaptation in response to low water levels is a modal shift towards rail transport.

The Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2023 caused operational disruptions, including reduced available loading space on the Upper Danube. viadonau plans to compare shippers' costs with the required investment costs of waterway administrations through e.g. a Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA).

Future plans include expanding the interview range beyond Austria.

Furthermore, Danube Commission has few workshops planned for autumn. For further information please check their online meeting calendar: <https://www.danubecommission.org/dc/en/schedule-of-meetings-and-meetings-of-the-dc/>

10. Fleet Modernisation

RED III directive (Mr. Markus Simoner)

RED III is a significant legal framework aiming to promote clean energy development across all sectors of the EU economy by 2030, with an overall renewable energy target of at least 42.5%. This target encompasses sectors such as transport, industry, heating and cooling and buildings. For the transport sector specifically, there's a target of 29% renewable energy or a 14.5% greenhouse gas intensity reduction by 2030. Each EU country must devise its own implementation roadmap, with national legislation due by May 21, 2025, following RED III's entry into force on November 20, 2023.

Danube navigation is expected to contribute to these objectives, primarily through the adoption of alternative fuels like Hydrotreated Vegetable Oils (HVO) as a short-term solution until 2030. To facilitate coordination and cooperation, a joint workshop between the Danube Commission and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) PA 1a is scheduled for 8th October 2024 in Budapest, inviting Danube countries and navigation sector representatives.

Ensuring integration into national frameworks requires extensive coordination between different ministries at national level. While the discussion in Austria is ongoing, the communication to the water transport experts was rather late.

Markus Simoner asked the national representatives to actively involve themselves in the discussions in their countries, so that inland navigation is not overlooked in the broader sectoral discussions.

Transnational coordination across the Danube is also seen as crucial.

Danube Business Talks and Greening IWT

Main conclusions: The use of Hydrotreated Vegetable Oils (HVO) in conventional diesel engines can immediately reduce CO₂ emissions by up to 90%. While electric engines boast superior efficiency (up to 85%) compared to diesel engines (up to 44%), widespread adoption of electric engines powered by fuel cells with green hydrogen or methanol is not expected within the next two decades. Hydrogen, offering zero CO₂ emissions, faces limited availability and storage challenges. Methanol, with up to 25% fewer CO₂ emissions, could be introduced faster, but bunkering capacity remains an issue.

11. Education and Jobs (Ms. Liliana Martes)

The shortage of qualified nautical personnel in the Danube region was addressed at the Danube Business Talks and will also be discussed during the upcoming 13th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region on 20th/21st Juni 2024.

Addressing the shortage of qualified nautical personnel in the Danube region requires collaborative efforts and innovative solutions.

Key initiatives discussed during the Danube Business Talks (DBT) emphasized the need to attract new recruits, particularly younger individuals, and ensure that onboard working conditions are conducive to retention. A critical aspect is harmonizing language requirements across the Danube, with English

proposed as a common language. However, objections from some countries hindered agreement in the past, underscoring the need for leadership from the Danube Commission (DC) in this matter.

Participation in public consultation for the EC initiative *Inland Waterway Transport – smart and flexible EU crewing rules* is important to improve crewing rules for inland waterway transport, fostering safety and modernization while attracting new generations to the sector. https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13749-Inland-waterway-transport-smart-and-flexible-EU-crewing-rules/F_en

Efforts focus on identifying reasons for the shortage and proposing solutions, including joint initiatives to attract and train new recruits, harmonizing crewing requirements, and addressing language barriers. Ongoing measures span various levels, with emphasis on recruiting entry-level personnel and involving academic organizations. Collaborative efforts are key to addressing these challenges and ensuring a skilled and sustainable workforce for the future of Danube navigation.

It was noted that entry-level personnel are excluded from minimum crew requirements. This leads to a corporate disinterest in hiring beginners, and on the other hand also to the lack of opportunities for beginners to gain experience, thus leading to recruitment gaps.

12. Joint PA1a/PA11 Working Group on Administrative Processes (Ms. Viktoria Weissenburger)

Cooperation with PA11 has undergone significant evolution, with various milestones marking progress. Initially, surveys among shipping companies and vessel operators at border crossings were conducted in 2014, followed by the release of the first Practical Manual for border control procedures in 2015, which has since undergone several updates. The introduction of DAVID forms, encompassing Arrival & Departure Reports, Crew Lists, and Passenger Lists, occurred between 2017 and 2022. Currently, efforts are focused on the digitalization of DAVID forms in CEERIS.

Moving forward, the current focus lies on re-evaluating and re-financing the work program. Planned sector interviews in 2024 aim to gather insights for the implementation of TERM, a transnational electronic registration and time management tool. These interviews will also address systemic administrative issues, with stakeholders' feedback shaping future actions.

