



# DRP Gap analysis – 3<sup>rd</sup> call

Revised – WP 29, 04.06.2025



## Approved projects/themes per SO

### Specific Objective 1.1

SO 1.1 has six focus areas in connection to which so far fifteen projects were financed from 1<sup>st</sup> call.

Call	Project	Focus Areas	Focus area
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. RDI related transnational policies and processes for closing innovation gaps and towards the uptake of innovation and advanced technologies e.g. artificial intelligence, nanotechnologies, advanced materials, advanced manufacturing and processing (production technologies) and biotechnology.</li><li>2. Transnational RDI related activities for capacity building along thematic value chains.</li><li>3. Technology transfer and technology uptake towards and from SMEs and improved access to quadruple transnational research and innovation infrastructures with macro-regional significance.</li><li>4. Circular economy policies and processes in specific related domains e.g. electronics and ICT batteries and vehicles, packaging, plastics, textiles, construction and buildings, food and nutrients.</li><li>5. Developing smart, sustainable and green transport technologies and networks, as well as emobility solutions.</li><li>6. Integration of smart cities and smart regions solutions in the planning, management and development of DR regions and cities.</li></ol>	
1	<b>Green-Tex</b>	to strengthen transnational collaboration and innovation in the Danube area's sustainable textile sector and thus make value chain actors in partner regions more resilient and competitive in adjusting to global shifts from traditional to more regenerative circular economy based green textile practices.	4
1	<b>DECORATOR</b>	aspires to catalyse the circular transformation of the built environment in the Danube Region structured around the cradle-to-cradle (C2C) approach.	3&4

1	<b>Plan-C</b>	aims to boost the transformation of the plastics value chain in the Danube Region towards circularity through the transnational cooperation of plastics processors/producers and the machine industry	4,2,1
1	<b>RTIT&gt;&gt;</b>	to develop and uptake the transnational Action Plan to accelerate RTI transfer in the field of materials and material technologies in the DR that is based on the New Industrial Strategy for Europe	1,2,3
1	<b>CI-Hub</b>	improving innovation potential in less innovative regions and to a significant extend non-urban industrial regions in transition with a low innovation performance and weak innovation infrastructure, in absolute terms or comparatively to neighbouring regions.	1,3,4
1	<b>CapTTict</b>	to reduce the innovation gap and enhance the capacities for technology and knowledge transfer in the field of ICT in nine countries of the Danube region. This project addresses the lack of synergies, cooperation and exchange among knowledge transfer and innovation stakeholders and insufficient business support services for SMEs in the Danube Region.	3,2,1
1	<b>DANOVA NEXT</b>	improvement of transport accessibility (air, water & urban transport) in the DR for all disabilities by creating innovative services and providing fully accessible Digital Travel Information Services (DTIS) through the establishment of a Smart Network of transport facilities, making a change and contributing to reduce the innovation gap across the DR.	1&5
1	<b>PilotInnCities</b>	To stimulate the uptake and upscaling of Smart City innovations, the project aims to lay foundations and provide guidelines for more efficient quadruple helix collaboration, using the Finland inspired method of agile piloting as a central instrument.	6,1,3
1	<b>Circular DigiBuild</b>	The fragmented and risk-averse construction sector is slow to adopt digital innovation across Danube area. Pilots will be implemented to showcase how disruptive innovations for circular economy interventions can harness the 'clean construction' practices in Danube Region.	1,2,3,4
1	<b>BrAln</b>	the overall goal of the project is to contribute to the increase of the competitiveness of Danube regional SMEs by familiarizing them with the relevance and potential of AI and equip their employees	1,2,3

		for i4.0 transition processes and further adapt them to the human-centred i5.0 approach.	
1	<b>TEX-DAN</b>	aims at the uptake of technologies at SMEs for improved circularity in the textile and fashion (T&F) value chains through transnational collaboration in the Danube Region.	4
1	<b>DIGI4Care</b>	aims to foster the uptake of innovation and digital technologies in healthcare provision through transnational collaboration. It employs a novel strategy that sets it apart from other initiatives in the Danube Region by leveraging the potential of digital technologies to enhance the quality of healthcare services and improve patient outcomes throughout the patient journey, including prevention and screening, primary and outpatient care, as well as post-clinical, long-term, and rehabilitation care.	1,2,3
1	<b>IaaS 4 DR</b>	aims to create in the target regions the conditions to be able to deliver locally durably improved and integrated innovation support services – i.e. different service providers combining seamlessly their services – which are going significantly beyond what they can do by building on their own limited resources.	1&3
1	<b>DECIDE</b>	to provide methods and tools to SMEs, Startups, Economic Developers for the development of successful Circular Economy Business Models (CEBM) by modelling existing best practice CEBM (in batteries, food, textile, packaging, smart city), in-depth simulations on ecological and social dimensions and continuous monitoring of the CEBM's success - protected by blockchain technology.	4
1	<b>GeoNetSee</b>	will create a solution for monitoring unstable terrain and artificial structures, which will include a geosensor network and a platform for collecting, processing, and visualizing collected data in real-time. An innovation chain of technology and knowledge-intensive activities within the DRP region will be created to close off innovation gaps and the uptake of advanced technologies for a smarter and greener Danube region.	2,4,6

## Gaps:

Focus area 5: Developing smart, sustainable and green transport technologies and networks, as well as e-mobility solutions were not covered by any project sufficiently.

Proposed targeted topics could be:

1. Fostering Uptake of Radical Mobility Innovations
2. Integration of new digital and green solutions into water-related local urban and rural mobility

## Conclusions

Taking into account that all programme indicators are covered by the 1<sup>st</sup> Call funded projects and no sufficient remaining amount of funds are available in Priority 1, SO 1.1 can remain closed for the 3<sup>rd</sup> CfP.

## Specific Objective 1.2

SO 1.2 has three main focus areas in connection to which so far five projects were financed from 1<sup>st</sup> call.

Call	Project	Focus Areas	Focus area
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Skill development for and of joint advancement of smart specialisation strategies and policies including a special focus on less advanced regions</li><li>2. Skills development and cross sectorial collaborations between smart industries and traditional type of industries for industrial transformation and transition towards industry 4.0, robotisation, mechatronics, digital technologies (including internet of things, artificial intelligence and creative industries)</li><li>3. Skills development for delivering products and services with transnational impact.</li></ol>	
1	WE. Circular	to increase <i>digital and business skills of women entrepreneurs</i> (WE) for circular transition and to equip the main stakeholders with skills necessary to develop and implement smart specialization	1&2

		strategies, supporting WE from the Danube Region <i>for transition to industry 4.0 while fulfilling circular economy aspects.</i>	
1	<b>DRWO4.0</b>	the DR <i>wood industry</i> improvement through the contribution to its <i>transformation towards I4.0</i>	2
1	<b>SpinIT</b>	intends to harvest transnational knowledge in order to <i>align to S3</i> and to provide solutions developed through bottom-up approach with quadruple helix involvement in order to <i>develop skills for S3, IT sector development, I4.0 and IT cross sectoral collaboration</i> in 10 territories and 8 countries of DR.	1&2
1	<b>Danube DNA</b>	Creation of the Danube DNA - <i>Digital transformation Network of Active SMEs training and knowledge transfer centers</i> in the Danube region.	1&2
1	<b>RISE</b>	<i>improving entrepreneurial competences and skills in remote areas through food innovation potentials</i> with the aim to accelerate transnational knowledge transfer integrated into sustainable transnational mentorship program to raise the competences of (1) regional mentors in partner pilot regions and (2) small-scale food & drink providers in cross-sector topics with the focus on digital, energy efficient and material circular technology improvements in partner remote areas.	2

### Gaps:

Focus Area 3: Skills development for delivering products and services with transnational impact was not covered by any projects that got funded.

### Conclusions:

Taking into account that focus area 3 was not targeted by funded projects and several programme indicators are also not covered yet, a targeted call with below concept can be launched for SO 1.2 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> CfP:

#### ***AI skills development for delivering products and services with transnational impact in the Danube Region:***

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is transforming industries and redefining how businesses operate globally. In the Danube Region, there is an urgent need to equip organisations with AI-related skills to enhance competitiveness, drive innovation, and ensure sustainable economic growth. This thematic scope is also strongly linked to the EC COM (2025) 163 mid-term review stating that “digitalisation of public services and the

integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the public and private sectors are levers for competitiveness.

This call for proposals would target projects that foster AI skills development, enabling primarily public and private non-profit organisations supporting businesses, startups, and professionals to leverage AI technologies for transnational collaboration, digital transformation, and creation of high-value products and services,.

The key objectives of this call are:

- Develop AI-related skills that enhance the delivery of transnational products and services by supporting SMEs, startups and professionals in adopting AI-driven solutions for business growth
- Integration of existing AI solutions into transnational, digital (data-based) ecosystems that utilise technologies such as IoT (Internet of Things), blockchain, XR, digital twins and cloud solutions
- Promote ethical AI, data literacy, and responsible AI development across industries
- Strengthen cooperation between educational institutions, businesses, and policymakers to build an AI-ready workforce
- Foster AI-driven entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems in the Danube Region
- Development of a common transnational AI competence framework for the Danube Region
- Development and training of methods and tools for SMES in the Danube Region to test and securely operate AI solutions
- Build on AI-oriented existing, complimentary platforms and services, that contribute to the implementation of the Danube strategy

Proposed projects should focus on some the following areas:

- AI ethics and governance: development and training on ethical AI use, bias detection, and regulatory compliance to ensure responsible AI deployment
- AI in entrepreneurship: support for AI startups through incubations programs, mentorship, and funding guidance
- Transnational AI collaboration: joint projects between universities, research centres, and businesses to develop transnational AI solutions such as
  - AI training and education: development of AI training programmes, workshops, and certification courses for students and professionals



- AI for business applications: practical training on AI-powered tools for industries such as manufacturing, agriculture and healthcare
- AI & digital transformation: programs that help organisations integrate AI into their operations to enhance productivity and efficiency
- AI for Sustainability: AI-driven innovations for climate monitoring, smart cities, and sustainable resource management
- Integration of AI solutions into transnational, digital ecosystems

Depending on their objectives, successful projects should demonstrate the following::

- Increased AI literacy and practical AI skills among professionals of public organisations piloted and tested in supporting businesses in delivering transnational products and services
- Development of AI-based learning materials, training platforms, and certification programmes
- Strengthened transnational collaboration in AI research and development
- AI-driven solutions that enhance economic and social development
- Measures that enable SMEs to better utilise AI
- Increased connection of stakeholders with AI experience with SMEs that lack experience
- Cooperation with existing and well-functioning organizational structures under the EU Strategy for Danube Region

Ideal partnership:

Primarily:

- Public institutions, innovation and development agencies
- Universities, research institutes, and AI training providers, innovation labs
- Business support organisations and clusters
- Chambers of commerce and digital economy organisations
- NGOs working in digital skills development

Secondly:

- SMEs, startups and industry associations

## Specific Objective 2.1

SO2.1 has 10 projects in implementation from the 1<sup>st</sup> call based on 2 focus areas.

Because of the good progress in reaching the programme's indicators SO2.1 was closed for the 2<sup>nd</sup> call.

Call	Project	Focus Areas 1: Increasing the share of renewable energy in the Danube region 2: Decreasing carbon intensity in the power and transport sectors	Focus area
1	<b>Active2Public Transport</b>	The project decreases the carbon intensity and reduces GHG emissions in the transport sector by supporting the shift towards environmentally friendly modes of transport such as active mobility.	1&2
2	<b>CITYWALK 2.0</b>	Decrease of energy use and carbon Intensity of Urban Transport through shift to active urban mobility.	1&2
3	<b>Danube GeoHeCo</b>	Increase of use of shallow geothermal energy in the DR through initiating a robust transnational cooperation of promotion and support actions.	1
4	<b>Danube Indeet</b>	Integrated and decentralised concept for establishing transnational, sustainable and cross-sectoral transport and energy systems based on renewable energy in the DR.	1&2
5	<b>DECA</b>	Accelerate citizen-led renewable energy actions in the DR through jointly developed and scalable capacity development and community energy project pipeline solutions.	1
6	<b>ESINERGY</b>	Reduction of the energy peak-loads to the electrical network for the correct implementation of the Directive on the promotion of the use of energy from renewable sources.	1
7	<b>NRGCOM</b>	Reduction of energy dependency and GHG emissions by identifying and improving the operational conditions of energy communities in the DR.	1
8	<b>REHEATEAST</b>	Promotion of catalytic measures and widely adaptable solutions to the financial and environmental sustainability challenges of DHC systems in the Eastern DR.	1
9	<b>SMEnergy</b>	Increase of the share of renewable energy in the DR among SMEs with high energy intensity by capacity building for sustainable energy use.	1

10	<b>StoreMore</b>	Increase the share of RES in the DR by resolving the problem of energy storage.	1
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## Gaps

As indicated above the variability of proposed topics is quite wide and goes in the energy topic from storage to finance solutions, via the development of dedicated communities and the encouragement of SMEs to invest in RES.

Solutions for green transport are proposed by 3 entries. This unbalance could either possibly be triggered by the recent energy discussion and natural gas shortage due to the war in Ukraine or by the re-orientation of the programme towards the combination of RES use in transport or transport systems.

An additional challenge can be found in the territorial scope of the projects. While it is beyond discussion that the energy transition is of utmost importance for the entire region, it has to be ensured that small and medium municipalities get involved and take up and implement the project's results.

## Conclusions

Considering the provisions outlined in the "Energy transition" section of "A modernised Cohesion policy: The mid-term review" (MTR, COM(2025) 163 final) published by the European Commission and taking into account the still growing need for sustainable, renewable energy solutions in line with the IP of the Interreg Danube Region highlights the necessity to define a targeted 3<sup>rd</sup> call for "sustainable renewable energy solutions in the context of energy production, heating and cooling systems, grid load, energy communities, district heating and cooling, storage and peak load reduction" directly linked to focus 1 of SO2.1 "Increasing the share of renewable energy in the Danube region".

To maximise the impact generated by corresponding activities it the call is concentrated on small and medium municipalities to motivate them to participate in the energy transition. This could also allow for capitalization opportunities with ongoing 1<sup>st</sup> call projects like *Danube geoHeCo*, *REHEATEAST*, *StoreMore*, *ESINERGY*, *SMEnergy*, *NRGCOM*, and *DECA*, *Danube Indeet* who already created topic-wise a good foundation that could possibly be taken up or even developed further. To facilitate financing solutions for relevant investments for small and medium municipalities initiatives such as the European City Facility (EUCF) that was set up under the Horizon 2020 Framework

Programme for Research and Innovation of the European Union, and is currently being funded as part of the [Life Programme](#) is also recommended.

## Partnership

Primarily:

- Regional and local administrations, municipalities
- Regional and local public institutions
- Development/ investment/ energy agencies
- Service providers and SMEs

Secondly:

- Universities, research institutes
- Business support organizations (e.g. financial/banking associations, chambers)

## Specific Objective 2.2

**Main topics covered in selected projects:**

SO 2.2 has three main focus areas in connection to which so far four projects financed from 1<sup>st</sup> call, as well as another four are selected in the frame of the 2<sup>nd</sup> call.

Call	Project	Focus Areas	Focus area
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Supporting harmonised, joint capacities and data availability in Danube Region scale climate change forecasting and vulnerability assessment to support policy making and awareness raising</li><li>2. Supporting harmonised, coordinated, joint disaster prevention, preparedness and response activities on environmental risks, on floods, droughts, or accidental pollution of rivers on transnational river(-basin) scale and climate-change related other disasters (e.g. wildfires, heat waves)</li><li>3. Strengthen the preparedness and adaptive capacity of the society (including also disaster management organisations, volunteer rescue teams), economy and nature to cope with</li></ol>	

		impacts of climate change and establish climate services to foster the resilience	
1	<b>Be Ready</b>	is increasing the capacities of regional and city authorities and civic actors to plan, mitigate and manage climate adaptation and disasters in connection to urban heat	3
1	<b>SpongeCity</b>	is improving urban climate change adaptation capacities by testing and promoting the 'sponge city' methodology on transnational level to combat (flash-)floods and water scarcity in urban areas.	3
1	<b>RESTORIVER</b>	demonstrates climate proof natural water retention measures in restoring riversides and riparian urban, peri-urban areas, to increase climate adaptation capacities by reducing the risk of droughts, floods and heatwaves	3
1	<b>SAFETY4TMF</b>	prepares Coordinated prevention and disaster management activities on Tailings Management Facilities by authorities, municipalities and other stakeholders for solutions reducing transnational risks and hazards of accidental pollution	2
2	<b>InDiMaND</b>	will establish a unified disaster management framework, tailored to the diverse and specific conditions prevalent across the Danube Region countries, ensuring a cohesive and effective approach to disaster prevention, preparedness, and response	2
2	<b>LAREDAR</b>	plans transnationally coordinated actions of lakes and reservoirs management to reduce flood risks along transnational rivers in the Danube River Basin	2
2	<b>Danube-ADAPT</b>	is about harmonising macro-regional data for climate change forecasting and vulnerability assessment, and developing territorially integrated, data-based policy support solutions	1
2	<b>TRANSFER Danube</b>	intends to develop an integrated monitoring system and tools for agro-climatic risks within Danube Region to properly adapt and respond to climate change and extreme weather event impacts (drought, floods, etc.) in agriculture	1

## Gaps

The eight selected projects together cover broad range of topics in the field of climate change adaptation and environmental risks related disaster management, providing also a quite balanced contribution to the three thematic focus areas of SO 2.2. From this point of view no specific thematic gap can be identified in this SO. The importance of the topic for the region was also highlighted during the INTERREG GO event organised by the European Commission, where disaster risk management was discussed during a

workshop where also DRP was presented, and where continuity of cooperation in this field was highlighted.

## Conclusions

Based on the financed and proposed projects no specific thematic gap can be identified in SO 2.2. Considering that this thematic field is very broad, it is proposed that 3<sup>rd</sup> call proposals can address each three original focus areas of SO 2.2, while setting up territorial restrictions that project proposals shall target broader territorial scope beyond the urban, municipal level (as already several projects have local, urban focus), where transnational level harmonisation and coordination of forecasting, monitoring, preparedness, or reaction is necessary (targeting the Danube River Basin, or its main sub-basins, or the Danube Region, a thematically reasonable, broad and coherent transnational space within, covering the targeted area in its entirety – e.g. a transnational river network, a broad transnational area of DR affected by the same environmental risk with potential transboundary impact) in connection to climate change adaptation and / or climate change induced environmental risks (floods, droughts, wild fires), or accidental pollution of rivers.

Partnerships shall be capable of influencing relevant transnational, national level policies, strategies, or the higher operative levels in the addressed thematic field in all countries of the targeted transnational area. This can include primarily e.g. national, regional public authorities and organisations responsible for water-flood management, or related environmental issues; hydro-meteorological services; disaster management authorities; professional and volunteer civil protection and rescue organisations. Additionally, regional governments; interest groups including NGOs (e.g. international organisation, environmental organisations), research institutions and universities can also be involved in the partnerships.

## Specific Objective 2.3

### Main topics covered in selected projects:

In connection to the three focus areas of SO 2.3 four projects are financed from 1<sup>st</sup> call and another two are to be contracted from the 2<sup>nd</sup> call applications.

Call	Project	Focus Areas	Focus area
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		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthening capacities for prevention and mitigation of water pollution or for restoration of good quality of transnational water bodies</li> <li>2. Harmonising management practices between water management, agriculture, environment, navigation, hydropower and flood protection to improve the quality and quantity of water and sediment in transnational river systems, taking into consideration the potential impacts of climate change</li> <li>3. Transnational coordination of water supply management, especially in relation to basin-wide importance of groundwater bodies</li> </ol>	
1	<b>AQUATIC PLASTIC</b>	provides solutions to measure, monitor and manage plastic waste accumulations in transnational rivers to reduce plastic pollution in the Danube River Basin	1
1	<b>MicroDrink</b>	enhances capacity building & governance at different levels for management & prevention of micro plastic pollution in drinking water resources of Danube region	1
1	<b>Tethys</b>	develops harmonised procedures, tools, coordinated strategies and prioritisation of actions to tackle new challenges, pressures and targets regarding Hazardous Substances water pollution in the Danube River Basin	1
2	<b>D-CLEAN</b>	plans to build capacities and solutions to mitigate municipal wastewater and stormwater pollution to improve water quality in the Danube River Basin	1
1	<b>DanubeSediment_Q2</b>	elaborates a Danube River Basin-wide sediment balance and quality management strategy and management plan	2
1	<b>Danube Water Balance</b>	develops a harmonized water balance modelling system for the entire Danube River Basin	3
2	<b>InnoWATCCH</b>	will promote innovative water retention measures, as groundwater management solution, addressing also mitigation of climate change impacts and sustainable agriculture	3

## Gaps

While each focus area of SO 2.3 is addressed by at least one project, most of those are dealing with challenges in connection to different kind of pollutions of the rivers, or sediment balance and quality in the Danube River Basin. The programme however is not so advanced with projects in connection to climate change induced challenges of

transnational water bodies as there are much less projects in connection to the other two focus areas.

## Conclusions

Taking into consideration the topics already addressed by the projects selected in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> call (also considering to a certain extent those ones implemented previously in the DTP) and the identified thematic gaps in relation to SO 2.3, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> call SO 2.3 is proposed to target thematic focus 2 (harmonising management practices between relevant sectors to improve the quality and quantity of transnational water bodies) and focus 3 (transnational coordination of water supply management in transnational river(basin)s). Within those addressing potential impacts of climate change on transnational water management by harmonising and coordinating policy approaches, management practises between water management, agriculture, environment, navigation and hydropower to improve the quantity (and quality) of water in transnational river systems of DRB with key topics in relation to water scarcity, balanced use of water and coordinated management of low-water periods on transnational rivers of DRB (considering also that flood management is related to SO 2.2). This thematic scope is also in strong connection with the COM/2025/0084 regulation, which aligns cohesion policy investments to the new challenges and priorities identified by the mid-term review of the Cohesion Policy, among others adding water resilience to the scope of water management. The geographic scope of the proposals shall be on the whole Danube River Basin, or at least a sufficiently broad part of it, major transnational river(s), river basin and possibly in the entirety of the targeted river basin.

Project partnerships shall be capable of influencing relevant transnational, national level policies, strategies, or the higher operative levels in the addressed thematic fields in all countries of the targeted transnational area. This means also that the partnerships shall have balanced mix of relevant organisations from the water management, environmental, inland navigation, agricultural, hydropower plant sectors according to the specific scope of the proposed project. More specifically, partnerships can primarily be built by national, regional public authorities and organisations of the relevant thematic sectors, hydro-meteorological services, infrastructure and (public) service providers (e.g. for water supply, waste-water treatment, hydro power plants, inland navigation). Partnerships can be strengthened also by interest groups including NGOs from the relevant thematic fields (e.g. international organisation, environmental organisations, farmer associations), research and development institutions, universities.



## Specific Objective 2.4

### Main topics covered in selected projects:

In connection to the three focus areas of SO 2.4 1 project is financed from 1<sup>st</sup> call and another four is under contracting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> call.

Call	Project	Focus Areas	Focus area
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Transnational cooperation for the improvement of ecological connectivity between habitats, nature protection areas along transnationally relevant ecological corridors of the Danube Region and for transnational conservation and restoration measures for endangered umbrella species as well</li><li>2. Creation and strengthening of networks of cooperation in relation to the ecological regions and among protected areas</li><li>3. Coordinated and harmonised measures within transnationally relevant ecological regions ensuring resilience and adaptation to climate change to reduce its impacts on biodiversity</li></ol>	
1	ForestConnect	is dealing with climate-smart forest connectivity for large carnivores in the Balkan-Carpathian Region	1
2	MonStur in the Danube	plans to establish and launch a transboundary system for monitoring sturgeons, to manage and safeguard migratory fish in the Danube River Basin	1
2	AVIATOR	plans to increase resilience and help adaptation to climate change and protection of birds of prey populations especially in connection to the effects of infectious and parasitic diseases spread by climate change in the Danube Region	3
2	CLIMANATRES	will carry out modelling of habitat suitability, supporting nature restoration planning and management of protected areas for more efficient adaptation to the climate change impacts on habitat types in the middle- and lower-Danube ecological regions	3
2	SCAN-DANUBE	plans to counteract decline of narrow-leaved ash forests, dominant tree species in riparian forests, affected also by the changing climate, in the Danube Region	3

### Gaps

Clear thematic gap can be identified in connection to the focus area of strengthened networks of cooperation in ecological regions, corridors and among protected areas,

although, since only five projects are (to be) approved in SO 2.4 after 2 calls for proposals, the other topics of SO 2.4 are also not that much addressed either.

## Conclusions

In the light of the strategic challenges highlighted in the mid-term review of the Cohesion Policy, given the fact that in SO2.4 most of the focus areas are addressed and considering that the two previous calls for proposals could not demonstrate the interest of relevant actors to strengthen networks of cooperation, e.g. limited number of protected area management bodies were involved in the project proposals, this SO is proposed to be closed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> call and the funds to be redirected to those SOs responding to the new challenges and priorities of the Cohesion Policy.

## Specific Objective 3.1

Main topics covered in selected projects:

Call	Project	Focus Areas	Focus area
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The integration of vulnerable groups into the labour market, with special attention on regions that display high proportions of disadvantaged</li> <li>2. Retaining skilled labour and developing a more sustainable migration of educated people</li> <li>3. Capacity building for employment support bodies (information and data systems; coordination; training e.g. in social economy).</li> </ol>	
1	IntegrAGE	Over 55 workers - retaining skilled labour with capacity building elements	2&3
1	CultHeRit	Employment of, and more especially, the retention of new young employees in the cultural sector	2
1	AMYABLE	Integration of vulnerable groups into the labour market. It works with WISEs - work integration social enterprises in agriculture	1
1	WIN	Peripheral industrial areas with the challenge of women's employment	1&3
1	Fem2forests	Increasing the share of women employed in the forestry sector.	1&2

1	Danube4SEecosystem	Social Enterprises as positive change agents for inclusive growth, including employment for the disadvantaged.	1&3
2	COOPOWER	Vulnerable youth inclusion	1
2	SteelCityZen	Empowering Danube Region towns with strong (mono)industrial legacies to facilitate labour market diversification	2 & 3
2	IMPACTA	Tackling persistent long-term unemployment, income inequalities, skills gaps, and a weak social economy by promoting gender equality and economic empowerment	1

## Gaps

In terms of the three focus areas of the specific objective 3.1, it can be observed that all three areas have been/will be significantly addressed by the projects from Call 1 and the potential from Call 2. The three focus areas of the specific objective are broad in scope and allow for a wide variety of contributory activities, outputs and results. Member States agreed on indicative suggested actions to support the understanding of the focus and if we bring these into the consideration of the gap analysis, then perhaps we could consider the following as gaps:

- *Creation of an information system and support for the provision of information and data about life events connected to the periodic and permanent migration of workforce, caused by labour market inequalities between the eastern and the western parts of the macro region*
- *Build up of a “Danube observatory system” about labour migration and its impacts on cohesion; involving public bodies responsible for monitoring & evaluation, academia and civil society*

## Conclusions

Overall, the calls are generating projects which have and will contribute to each of the expected focus areas. A case could be made towards the need to address more specific aspects as above, and there remains a sense that although public employment services are increasingly involved, we may not be strongly impacting their strategic approaches and core implementation.

## Targeted 3rd Call

Additional focus 3 activity targeted towards capacity building of public employment services in the Danube Region.

Focus 3: *Capacity building for employment support bodies (information and data systems; coordination; training e.g. in social economy).*

Indicative examples:

- *Creation of an information system and support for the provision of information and data about life events connected to the periodic and permanent migration of workforce, caused by labour market inequalities between the eastern and the western parts of the macro region*
- *Build up of a “Danube observatory system” about labour migration and its impacts on cohesion; involving public bodies responsible for monitoring & evaluation, academia and civil society*

### Partnership

Public employment Services; employment support bodies; universities and research organisations; science parks; companies, chambers and their associations; social partners; sector skills councils; national and regional authorities and development agencies; schools; minority representative organisations.

Note: partnerships with a strong non-EU representation will be appreciated.

## Specific Objective 3.2

Main topics covered in selected projects:

Call	Project	Focus areas	Focus area
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Developing innovative educational models, programs, practical tools and materials for disadvantaged learners, including early school leavers</li><li>2. Maximising the use of existing knowledge and experience to develop best practices in inclusive education policy and advancing education and policy reform</li></ol>	

		3. Innovative approaches to encourage and improve inclusive vocational education and training and lifelong learning	
1	Back on Track	The integration of rural NEETs into society, education, training and the labour market	1
1	MEET	Building capacities to support youth mental health and positively influence negative consequences e.g. early school leaving and NEET. It does this at a practical level with pilots involving educators and social workers and also at the strategic level.	2
2	TransAC	Addressing social stress and brain drain in rural and crisis regions by co-creating a training academy (additive manufacturing) with learners and stakeholders	1&3
2	Skills4Life	Improving leaving care policies in the Danube region and developing an educational program for youth leaving the special child protection system	1 & 3
2	Dinamic Danube	Enhancing the digital and managerial competencies of small family farms with an emphasis on women	3
2	Flexitrain	Integrating early school leavers into the labour market through developing, testing and rolling out novel, flexible disadvantage compensation training methods in the Danube Region	1
2	PATHS	Developing the existing career guidance tools in the countries of the DR by building up life path support services, which are accessible at the municipal level	2 & 3

## Gaps

In terms of the three focus areas of the specific objective 3.2, it can be observed that all three areas have been/will be significantly addressed by the projects from Call 1 and the potential from Call 2. The three focus areas of the specific objective are broad in scope and allow for a wide variety of contributory activities, outputs and results.

## Conclusions

With the existing three focus areas and their broad scope, it is difficult to pinpoint thematic gaps. What could be interesting is a consideration of whether partnerships have the weight to drive towards policy and strategy impact at a particular level. This

may well prove difficult to achieve at national/transnational levels. Potentially a more targeted/strategic call could be used to better ensure that partnerships and approaches are intrinsically embedded in relevant existing policy and strategic directions in the Danube Region.

### Targeted 3<sup>rd</sup> Call

#### Focus area1:

An example of a targeted approach could be to support Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) in the Danube Region. Any approach would need to be sufficiently flexible to reflect the diversity of VET approaches in the Danube Region. The understanding of CoVEs could include a network of partners that develop local skills ecosystems through cooperation with each other, including VET providers, employers, research centres, development agencies, and employment services centres of expertise, industrial training institutes/training centres, regional VET centres, industry skills centres, innovative centres. Vocational excellence can be understood as a wide-reaching and inclusive concept of high-quality skills provision that reflects the needs of employers, learners and society, which encompasses excellence in pedagogy and training, social justice and inclusion, lifelong learning, transversal skills, organization, innovation, continuing professional education and community needs.

*-CoVEs bring together 'a wide range of local partners, including VET providers, employers, research centres, development agencies and employment services (among others), to develop 'skills ecosystems' that contribute to regional, economic and social development, innovation and smart specialisation strategies.'* (ETF 2021, p. 11)- 1

A Danube support approach could potentially build upon the EUSDR Danube Region Platform on Centres of Vocational Excellence/Policy Platform for CoVEs started in 2021. A Danube Region project(s) could complement and further develop this initiative with a more coordinating/operational approach. This could include:

- Pilot programmes of work with a transnational character on specific areas of work e.g internationalization of CoVEs, CoVEs and social inclusion, public private partnerships; CoVEs and smart specialization; lifelong learning
- Creating networks, forums and working groups on specific themes connecting VET policy makers and providers with companies and industry representatives across the Danube Region

- Developing a support function for the understanding, guidance and complementarity of different programmes in the Danube Region supporting CoVEs (National, regional, transnational)
- Awareness and capacity building programmes for CoVEs in the Danube Region
- Strategic CoVE development in fields of transnational interest across the Danube Region

### **Partnership:**

VET providers including schools; tertiary education institutions; research institutions; science parks; companies, chambers and their associations; social partners; sector skills councils; national and regional authorities and development agencies; public employment services; minority representative organisations;.

Note: i) Partnerships with a strong non-EU representation will be appreciated.

ii) Partnerships are strongly encouraged to consult with the EUSDR PAC 9 and to complement the work of PAC 9 and that of other relevant organisations/initiatives such as the European Training Foundation (ETF) and Erasmus+.

### **Focus area 2:**

In addition to the strategic linked approach above, a second direction for SO 3.2 could also include additional approaches at the level of CoVEs. The first strategic type of approach is fairly specific in terms of targeting, which carries some risk in terms of developing a significant number of applications for potential selection and therefore the second direction, which is valid in its own right, complements this and provides a supportive element to the overall SO 3.2 call approach.

- The development of existing CoVEs or new CoVEs - developing their excellence potential (see broad understanding of excellence)
- CoVE focussed initiatives to modernise and transform the quality of VET systems to strategically support social, economic and pedagogical changes and challenges, e.g. new skill needs in the context of the green and digital transition
- The formation of multilevel Public Private Partnerships for VET and skills development

- Actions aimed towards embedding CoVEs in local innovation ecosystems and connecting them at the Danube level
- Facilitating the bringing together of CoVEs that share a common interest in specific sectors and innovative approaches to tackling societal challenges (e.g. social inclusion, green skills, digitalisation, AI, upskilling individuals with low qualification levels, etc.)

### Partnership:

VET providers including schools; tertiary education institutions; research institutions; science parks; companies, chambers and their associations; social partners; sector skills councils; national and regional authorities and development agencies; public employment services;.

### Notes:

- Centres of Vocational Excellence can be considered as centres of expertise industrial training institutes/centres, regional VET centres, industry skills centres, Innovative centres, centres of competence.....
- Vocational excellence is to be understood as a wide-reaching and inclusive concept of skills provision which encompasses pedagogy, social justice, lifelong learning, transversal skills, organization, innovation, continuing professional education and community needs.
- Project approaches towards VET should be sufficiently flexible to reflect the diversity of VET systems across the Danube Region
- Project approaches should take into consideration existing initiatives of relevance e.g. Erasmus +; ETF and National/local initiatives
- Upward convergence. This is of particular interest even more so from peripheral regions of the Danube Region
- Social inclusion is an important consideration

Note: Fundamental to the DR approach would be to develop our understanding of the contextual frame and scope for action. This would entail discussions with the EUSDR PAC 9 (Informally very interested in principle and ready to discuss); The European Training Foundation, who are very supportive of the CoVE approach and have a significant network, and Erasmus +, who directly fund CoVE startups/development.



The aim would be to complement existing CoVE initiatives but at the same time to develop a distinct Danube approach linked to the strategic frame of the EUSDR PAC 9 CoVE Policy Platform and the operational work of the ETF and Erasmus+.

### Specific Objective 3.3.

#### Topics in projects selected for financing

Call	Project	Focus areas	Focus area
		<p>Focus 1: Valorisation of local cultural and natural heritage for the development of sustainable tourism products and tourism services in order to increase regional added value and employment. Cultural heritage valorization.</p> <p>Focus 2: Improvement of accessibility of cultural and natural heritage for all, amongst others youth and vulnerable groups in order to promote social inclusion.</p> <p>Focus 3: Promoting community led natural and cultural heritage management and associated nature based and cultural tourism in rural areas and small cities.</p>	
2	PlaceCraft	Valorisation of cultural heritage, place-making, community-led tourism	1 & 3
2	Roman Legacy	Cultural heritage valorisation, Roman thematic route, cultural tourism	1
2	CAST	Underutilized heritage valorisation, accessibility, slow tourism, inclusiveness	1 & 2
1	COMMHERITOUR	Craft heritage valorisation, community-based tourism, participatory management	1 & 3
1	Culinary Trail	Culinary tourism, food heritage, development of festivals and routes	1

1	#RomansWineDanube	Wine and cultural tourism, regional promotion of local products	1
1	SReST	Sustainable and slow tourism, culinary heritage, rural development	1 & 2
1	MYSTICAL DANUBE	Sustainable tourism, slow tourism, eco-friendly rural tourism development	2
2	TRANSDINARICA2	Cycling routes, sustainable mobility, inclusion of vulnerable groups	2
1	IBC	Accessibility of tourism, inclusion of elderly, cycling tourism infrastructure	2
2	People Powered Tourism	Social innovation, community engagement in tourism, inclusiveness	2&3
1	DanubeGeoTour Plus	Accessibility improvement, inclusive tourism offers for disadvantaged groups	2
1	DANUBE WOOD(s)ROUTE	Slow tourism, rural heritage, eco-tourism routes	2&3
2	DanubeCrafts	Community-led heritage management, craftsmanship valorisation, capacity building	1&3

## Conclusions

Given the broad scope and the innovative solutions proposed by the projects, it appears that the region is making considerable progress in enhancing its tourism infrastructure, policies, and social cohesion. As for the output and result indicators, after the 1st and 2nd Calls for proposals the projects cover all the indicators set by the programme. Some of them are overachieved.

## Specific Objective 4.2

Main topics covered in selected projects:

Call	Project	Focus Areas	Focus area
		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Integrated urban-rural governance models including specific territorial development strategies for rural/remote areas as well as accessibility aspects and transport bottlenecks</li> <li>2. Support for more and stronger inter-institutional relations for the integrated development of transboundary functional areas</li> <li>3. Capacity building considering especially a better involvement of local and regional public bodies as well as civic actors in transnational policy making, territorial development frameworks and governance models</li> <li>4. Support for the monitoring and analysis of territorial processes affecting the cohesion and cooperation of the Danube Region to assist capacity building and institutional capacity</li> </ol>	
1	<b>Caring Communities</b>	Transnational multi-level approaches for transformative changes in the Homecare Sector and Community-based Development of the Danube Region	1, 3
1	<b>HARMONMISSIONS</b>	Harmonising the implementation of the European Missions on the Danube region level.	2, 3, 4
1	<b>NONA</b>	Development of a new multi-level governance model for mainstreaming green investment into sustainable territorial development in the Danube region.	3, 4
1	<b>ReIndBBG</b>	Reducing the socio-economic and administrative fragmentation in spatial, economic and environmental transformation processes through territorial demonstrations of Brownfield is Better than Greenfield (BBG) re-industrialisations and applying the 4H approach.	1, 3
1	<b>RurAll</b>	Development of a governance model on addressing depopulation in rural areas by improving planning, management, and decision-making/collaborative capacities of rural communities in exploiting the potential of deteriorating dwellings.	1, 3
2	<b>ANCHOR</b>	Public-Private Partnership and transnational exchange for better labour market governance to effectively tackle negative impacts of demographic change in the Danube Region	1, 3

2	<b>Danube4rural</b>	Integrated transnational governance model for adapting rural communities' policies to the needs of remote workers and employer organisations	1, 3
2	<b>Danube-ruralscapes</b>	Danube Ruralscapes - a Network of Professional Support for Self-organized Village Clusters Achieving Sustainable Heritage-based Ruralscapes	1, 3
2	<b>ELEVATE</b>	Cooperation between public, civil society and business sectors to introduce a multi-level governance model for inclusive territorial development that will actively engage disadvantaged groups, including elderly individuals (60+) in rural areas,	1, 3
2	<b>FUNDA</b>	Enhancing Institutional Capacities for Managing Functional Urban Areas in the Danube Region	2, 3
2	<b>SMILE INCUBATOR</b>	Development of a transnational Social Media Leadership Incubator for rural youth that will serve as a mechanism to strengthen leadership skills and empowerment, thus contributing to the development of sustainable democracies in the DR.	3

## Gaps

Due to the horizontal character of S.O.4.2., it is difficult to identify clear thematic gaps. All focuses identified for S.O.4.2 have been – in some cases more directly and in some less - addressed by a rather multifaceted set of projects, but overall no “critical mass” is achieved in relation to one or more of the focuses, which would make further cooperation efforts in these fields obsolete.

## Conclusions

Though no distinct gaps can be identified as drivers for shaping the future funding under S.O.4.2., the existing framework and challenges defined in it shall be approached in an updated, more focused and more strategic way:

1. Tackling the accelerated territorial peripheralization/polarization within the Danube Region and promoting balanced territorial and social-economic development, considering main demographic developments and recent technological advances

Justification: increasing regional disparities are a specific feature of the Danube Region and closely connected to beneath working demographic trends like brain-drain, depopulation or deterioration of rural and remote areas. In addition, recent

technological advances have the potential to further “fuel” the already ongoing territorial polarization. These inter-linked phenomena are not only aggravating the living-conditions in wide areas of the Danube Region and for certain demographic groups (e.g. youth, elderly or low-qualified workers) but are affecting the (global) competitiveness of the Danube Region as such. Projects tackling single aspects in this field have been (successfully) realised, yet a much broader and comprehensive strategic initiatives are needed for filling evidence gaps, defining a common territorial *vision* and introducing targeted and sustainable measures for mitigating or reversing existing mis-developments.

Expected partnerships, main activities, outputs and results: Core-partnerships under this point shall comprise national/regional ministries responsible for regional development, national and/or regional statistical offices as well local public bodies. Main activities shall be grouped around improving and transnationally harmonizing the evidence-base in relation to the topics concerned, a better and more effective alignment of policies needed for counter-balancing the accelerated polarisation within the DR and the empowerment of local actors for successfully testing and implementing sustainable solutions. Main outputs and results shall cover a governance model vertically and horizontally integrating core-actors in the field concerned, evidence-based and transnationally applicable policy documents as well as tools and action plans for their local implementation.

## 2. Making local (and regional) public governance systems more resilient to crisis-situations (“crisis proof”)

Justification: The COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine showed that crisis-situations not known for decades (or not known at all) suddenly can become real and influence basically all spheres of live. A specific contribution of S.O.4.2 in this context could consist in developing a framework for improving capacities for the crisis-preparedness especially of local public bodies in fields such as civil protection, maintaining critical infrastructure, dealing with de-stabilizing actions like cyber-attacks or misinformation and providing vital public services.

Expected partnerships, main activities, outputs and results: Core actors under this point are local public bodies, local (public, private or civic) actors involved in civil protection or disaster management as well as infrastructure operators from the local level. This main pillar should be complemented by academic and expert-type of bodies for better understanding the vulnerability of the local level vis-à-vis the multifaceted and interlinked threads. Furthermore relevant regional and national

bodies will be needed for updating policy frameworks and aligning them with a transnational perspective. Main activities shall tackle the analysis of crisis-scenarios especially in view of capacities needed for ensuring an adequate preparedness of local actors in the most vital fields, the creation of transnational coordination mechanisms in the field concerned. The main output is to be seen in a integrated transnational governance system for crisis-preparedness overcoming the existent fragmentation (in terms key-actors, frameworks and mechanisms) along “traditional” intervention fields like health, environment or safety.

3. Innovating and optimizing models of effectively involving citizens in transnational, multi-level territorial planning processes and promoting sustainable democracy

Justification: Models of local self-government and community engagement are multifaceted and have a long tradition in the Danube Region. Yet the big picture shows that many of Europe’s “low-trust-societies” with a low level of active participation in civil society are concentrated on this cooperation area. Larger strategic initiatives are an adequate tool for pooling existing experiences and key-actors and for introducing and testing new models. Whereas democratic participation in general decision making and territorial planning processes can be seen as the core-challenge in this field, new emerging phenomena (like the need for improved media literacy for confronting disinformation campaigns and fake news spreading through digital media) shall be considered too, not only, but also because they affect in particular the youth.

Expected partnerships, main activities, outputs and results: Key-actors under this point are organisations and initiatives representing the civil society, ideally with cross-border or transnational outreach. Partnerships shall be complemented by local public bodies as providers of the enabling environment needed for improved civic participation as well as relevant policy drivers from the national and regional level. Activities shall focus on the creation and testing of new models for local civic participation or the role – potentials, limitations, risks – of new technological phenomena like social media or AI in increasing institutional trust in the Danube Region. The main output/result envisaged is a platform acting as an incubator for innovating participation models and tools and for boosting the cooperation among key civic actors across the cooperation area.

4. Strengthening transnational capacities of public local and regional governance systems for ensuring the functioning of Global / European / Danubian Value Chains

Justification: The war in Ukraine highlighted the complex connections within global value chains and how disruptions in one area can affect different sectors and regions across the EU. The Danube Region – as Europe’s macro-region directly neighbouring a geopolitically more and more instable space – is both more exposed to threads resulting from recent developments and can at the same time contribute more and more directly to overcome (or mitigate) these threads. S.O.4.2 could offer a platform for tackling a specific aspect in this context, i.e. the role of local and regional governments in their interaction with businesses and civil actors for ensuring an effective and sustainable functioning of vital value chains.

Expected partnerships, main activities, outputs and results: Key-actors addressed under this point are local public bodies, business support organisations and main economical policy drivers. Core-activities shall aim at analysing the vulnerability of crucial value chains from a transnational perspective and the role of local public bodies for ensuring their effective functioning. The main output/result is to be seen in the creation of a coordination mechanism for Danubian value chains and increased capacities of local public bodies for sustaining critical value chains.