



40 Years
Danube
Rectors'
Conference

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Danube Rectors' Conference

A Success Story of Academic and Scientific Cooperation in the Danube Region

Ivanka Popović, Vice-President of the European University Association (EUA) & DRC Honorary President

The founding fathers of the Danube Rectors' Conference formed an academic community that has flourished and advanced as circumstances in Central and Eastern Europe have improved over the past forty years. Initially intended to bridge the East-West ideological divide, the DRC has become so much more, a true success story of scientific diplomacy.

My own relationship with the DRC started a dozen years ago, when, as vice-rector for research at the University of Belgrade, I started exploring the possibilities the DRC had to offer. It seemed like the ideal way to learn more about the European academic and research community through the experience of colleagues in the region. I was warmly received and learned a lot. This interaction created trust and the University of Belgrade hosted the DRC Annual Conference in 2014, which focussed on "Digital Culture – The Synergy between Higher Education and ICT". My cooperation with the DRC continued and I had the honour of presiding over the DRC in the period 2018–2020. During my mandate, the DRC started working more closely with the Steering Group PA7 of the European Strategy for the Danube Region. The end of my mandate was marked by Covid-19, the impact of which we did not fully comprehend at that time. The DRC provided information on best practices in distance learning to its members and adapted to online operation in all aspects of its work.

It was also a time when the idea of European university alliances was being developed. The role of the more than twenty universities from the Danube Region that are members of alliances is very important, as most of them are committed to regional outreach, which will strengthen the DRC community.



Just as we expected overall circumstances to improve, Russia invaded Ukraine. I had really believed that the hostilities in the Western Balkans, the consequences of which we are still feeling today, would be the last military conflict on European soil. Like many others, the DRC was quick to respond to support academic institutions in Ukraine. Ukraine is a part of the Danube Region, so the countries of the region have felt the conflict more deeply. DRC universities from neighbouring countries were quick to respond, support and advocate at the European level and the DRC has been in regular communication with its Ukrainian member universities.

The war and its impact on higher education institutions in Ukraine also became an important issue in international academic organisations, the European University Association (EUA) among them. Since the beginning of the war, the EUA, of which the DRC is a member, has fast-tracked the membership of the Ukrainian Rectors' Conference and presented a set of recommendations on sustaining Ukrainian universities and enabling them to continue their research and teaching activities. Mutually beneficial transnational and international cooperation strengthens universities and enables them to better fulfil their mission, while at the same time providing both students and staff the benefits of cross-cultural exchange. The activities of the DRC and other regional, European and international universities will continue to play a very important role in the development of universities in the Danube Region. Global events, climate change and the deterioration of the environment are daily challenges to our society. Universities are key players that can address these issues. They provide an open, transformative space for common knowledge production through research, education, innovation and culture.

The future of the DRC, as of any other academic organisation, depends on the willingness of its members to engage. There is a real danger that universities that have strengthened their local and international reputation and intensified their research potential will seek further partnerships at the expense of their engagement in the DRC. I am of the opinion that it is very important for universities in the Danube Region to maintain a strong and well-connected network so that their joint activities will contribute to the advancement of the whole region. I am certain that in the years to come the DRC will continue to play an important role in fostering regional academic cooperation and solidarity, as well as promoting academic excellence.

DRC Presidency

The Strength of Collaboration and Unity

Friedrich Faulhammer,

DRC President & Rector of the University for Continuing Education Krems

For 40 years, the Danube Rectors' Conference has symbolised seamlessly the strength of collaboration and the unity universities share among the Danube Region. From its beginning, the DRC has served as a platform for fostering not only academic cooperation, but for amplifying the voice of science whenever it came to elaborate strategies benefitting the development of regional cooperation and socio-economic prosperity in this important European region. Having the responsibility of universities for society in mind, the goal of the DRC is to share evidence-based knowledge and to forward higher education in the Danube Region and beyond by means of closely tied collaboration with agents from civil society, policy, the economic sector and administration. In doing so, the DRC from its very beginning understood its role as being a partner for European institutions in fostering European integration.



However, as we reflect on the past five years, it is impossible to ignore the profound impact of the turbulent events that have unfolded. The global pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the economic turbulences have altogether reshaped our perception of the DRC and the academic landscape as a whole.

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested the universities' resilience. They have faced unprecedented challenges, ranging from sudden shifts to online learning to major changes in research activities. Yet, in the face of adversity, the DRC and its member institutions have shown remarkable adaptability and determination. We have come together to share best practice models and methods, and to find innovative solutions to keep on providing our students with quality education.

It was the war in Ukraine that has brought back the importance of peace, stability, and international cooperation. In times of conflict, we as representatives of academia have the duty to stand up for dialogue, mu-

tual understanding, and the pursuit of knowledge. Until now, the DRC has played a vital role in fostering connections across borders, transcending political differences, and promoting academic exchanges in a transdisciplinary manner that bridges cultures and promotes mutual understanding.

Moreover, economic turbulences and rising economic disparities in our recent past have underlined the significance of collaboration and joint efforts in addressing common challenges. Through the DRC, we have strengthened our commitment to regional development, knowledge transfer, and innovation. We have leveraged our collective expertise to support economic recovery, sustainable development, and social progress in the Danube Region to meet the challenges of our time.

Looking ahead, the future of internationalisation and transnationalisation of academia and research in the Danube Region is filled with a number of opportunities. In a world increasingly interconnected at all levels, institutions in the field of higher education have taken the crucial role as a driver for innovation, research and development and that of agents of change.

Clearly the DRC has a pivotal role to play in shaping this future. We have to continue promoting the mobility of students, researchers, and staff across borders, changing brain drain into brain (re-)gain, fostering cross-cultural collaboration and understanding. By strengthening our networks, sharing resources, and encouraging interdisciplinary research, we can address global challenges such as climate change, digitalisation, and social inequality and find answers to the specific needs of the Danube Region.

As we embark on the next 40 years, in my position as the DRC's current president, I wish it to remain a beacon of excellence, a catalyst for progress, and a symbol of unity. I hope that we will continuously expand our horizons, embrace diversity, and nurture a sense of belonging among our member institutions. But above all, it is my wish to support the integration of the Danube Region into Europe by all those means that universities have at their disposal and in doing so live up to European values and its credo to be united in diversity.

Together, we can build a brighter future for the Danube Region, where education knows no boundaries, and where collaboration and knowledge transcend borders.

40th Anniversary

” The Rectors from the universities of Ulm, Linz, Vienna and Budapest established the Danube Rectors’ Conference at a meeting in Vienna in 1983. Since then, the number of countries and institutions involved in its activities has grown considerably. Presently, 64 higher education institutions from 15 countries are active members in this regional network.



Bridging Borders, Shaping Futures

Michael Weber, President of the Ulm University



universität
uulm

The idea for the Danube Rectors' Conference was born in 1982. The Rector of Ulm University at that time, Prof. Detlef Bückmann, wrote in 1996 about the Danube Rectors' Conference: "It was first formulated in Ulm during a visit by the rector of Budapest Semmelweis University. During this visit, agreements regarding the situation, the task and the concrete problems of the universities on both sides of the iron curtain became apparent, which were just as surprising in view of the political situation at the time as the pleasant harmony in personal informal contact."

Four decades later the Danube Rectors' Conference has developed into an organisation, which plays a pivotal role in fostering cooperation, collaboration, and academic excellence across the Danube Region. Forty years ago, our predecessors recognised the potential of bringing together universities along the Danube River. They understood that by transcending borders and forging strong partnerships, they could create a platform for intellectual exchange and joint initiatives that would have a lasting impact on education, research, and innovation.

The union of Danube Universities links different countries with different cultural backgrounds and thereby generates an atmosphere of mutual respect, understanding, and tolerance within and beyond the academic community. It aims to further develop the Danube Region into a prospering and progressive region within Europe and to contribute to the broader goal of creating a more united and cohesive Europe.

As we reflect on the achievements of the past four decades, let us also look to the future. The challenges that lie ahead – whether they be technological advancements, global crises, or societal transformations – require us to adapt, collaborate, and think innovatively. The Danube Rectors' Conference, with its strong foundation of shared values and collective expertise, is uniquely positioned to lead the way. Let us continue to build bridges of knowledge across the Danube, nurturing the next generation of leaders, thinkers, and innovators. Let us seize the opportunities that lie before us, working hand in hand to create a brighter future for education, research, and societal development.

Creating a Dynamic Academic Landscape

Sebastian Schütze, Rector of the University of Vienna

Membership in international networks like the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC), founded in 1983 during the Cold War, holds great value for the University of Vienna, reflecting its commitment to inter-university cooperation.

DRC membership offers a vital platform for collaborations and partnerships with Danube Region institutions, driving research and advancing education. Achievements in the internationalisation and transnationalisation of research and education in the Danube Region have been substantial. Inter-university cooperation across borders has played an important role in promoting modernisation and democratisation. Presently, the focus has shifted to modernising teaching and research practices in line with the evolving needs of the 21st century knowledge economy.

The Danube Rectors' Conference continues to play a pivotal role in fostering cultural exchange and understanding. By bringing together students and academics from diverse backgrounds and countries, it creates an inclusive learning environment that promotes tolerance, multiculturalism, and global citizenship.

Looking ahead, networks like the DRC will further modernise teaching and research practices, integrating emerging technologies and encouraging international mobility. The DRC will continue to serve as a platform for dialogue, cooperation, and partnerships with international organisations like the EUA, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe, driving the higher education agenda in the Danube Region.

The University of Vienna is committed to participating in and contributing to these developments. Through the DRC, we aim to shape a dynamic academic landscape in the Danube Region, promoting excellence, innovation, and democratic values for the next 40 years and beyond.



Embracing Collaboration and Innovation

László Borhy, Rector of the Eötvös Loránd University



Being a member of several university networks has two purposes for Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). Firstly, networks are an important pillar of the internationalisation efforts of our university. Member universities can learn from each other, think together and identify common challenges and interests, and explore solutions, especially at the regional level. On the other hand, as a member of a university network, we can actively participate in the shaping of higher education policies in the European Higher Education Area. In many cases, ELTE is the sole representative of all Hungarian higher education in these networks.

ELTE has widespread partnerships globally but being an active research university in Central Europe and the Danube Region, maintaining our long-standing traditional partnerships rooted in shared experiences like our common history, is strategically important for us. This is why we are proud to say that ELTE is one of the founding members of the Danube Rectors' Conference and we are grateful for the opportunity to have been a member of this important network for 40 years.

Through collaboration, knowledge exchange, access to funding, giving a platform and offering valuable opportunities, like the Annual Conference and the Summer School, the DRC continuously contributes to the internationalisation and transnationalisation of teaching and research, and plays a pivotal role in unlocking the potential of member universities, while considering the regional characteristics in past, present and future challenges. These have led to significant achievements in academic excellence, cross-border partnerships, and cultural diplomacy within the Danube Region in the past 40 years. Embracing these opportunities is crucial for the continued growth of universities in this dynamic region.

From the point of view of Eötvös Loránd University, academia and cooperation in the Danube Region in the next 40 years will play an even more crucial role. Considering the current political and environmental challenges in our region, higher education must position itself as dynamic catalysts for academic excellence, innovation, and societal progress.

On the Journey of Internationalisation

Stefan Koch, Rector of the Johannes Kepler University Linz

Johannes Kepler University Linz (JKU) has made remarkable strides in the internationalisation of research and higher education, especially through memberships in various networks like the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC). This includes encouraging the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and perspectives among students and scholars from different countries and cultures. By fostering an inclusive and diverse academic community, JKU has been able to create an environment that promotes cross-cultural understanding and intellectual growth. These collaborations facilitate the pooling of expertise and resources.

As a result, JKU has been able to participate in groundbreaking research projects that have led to significant advancements in various fields. Student mobility and study abroad programmes have played a pivotal role in JKU's internationalisation efforts. The experiences gained contribute to personal growth and resilience of the students, and their readiness for a globalised world.

Internationalisation efforts have also contributed to enhancing JKU's reputation and global rankings. Moreover, the internationalisation of research and higher education at JKU has had a positive economic and social impact on the region. The presence of international students and scholars has contributed to the local economy, and collaborations with industry foster innovation and knowledge transfer, driving economic growth and job creation. Looking towards the future, JKU aims to continue the journey of internationalisation. We aspire to play a leading role in addressing global challenges such as climate change, digital transformation, and healthcare, contributing to solutions with a worldwide impact with a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration. To achieve these goals, JKU expects to further enhance its internationalisation efforts by attracting talented students, researchers, and faculty, as well as increasing cooperation within the Danube Region. In line with its commitment to sustainability and social responsibility, JKU actively promotes these values in the region and recognises its role in driving positive change within the related transformation processes.





40 years of fostering
higher education

15 countries of the
Danube Region

18 Summer Schools
with **33** participating
nationalities

64 member
universities
with more than
1.000.000 students

DRC Permanent Secretariat

” As the events of recent months in Ukraine showed us, cross-border, transnational cooperation and solidarity are capable of fundamentally changing not only the course of history but of saving those who urgently need to be saved.



A Stronger Network than Ever Before

Daniel Martínek, Manager of the DRC Permanent Secretariat



Coming from a small village near the brewing city of Pilsen in Western Bohemia, I would never have imagined that the Danube River and its surrounding region would affect me in such a profound way as it has over the past five years. Already in 2018, as an intern I had the opportunity to get to know the day-to-day running of the secretariat and the organisational processes within the network. In the summer of the same year, I had the honour of attending my first DRC Summer School in Krems, Austria.

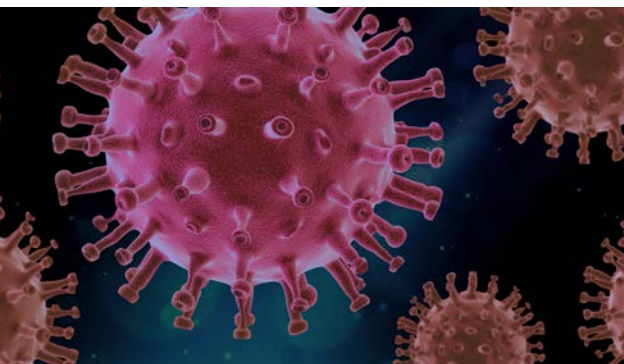
Although there was a forced break in organising the summer school in 2020–2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, after these years I went from being a participant to an organiser of the summer school. In the post-pandemic period, I have become fully responsible for the organisation of the summer school in Vienna (2022) and Cluj-Napoca (2023).

The convenient combination of my position as a research associate at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) and as a manager of the permanent secretariat of the DRC, together with the youth activities organised within both organisations, has enabled me to not only get to know many young, promising colleagues from different corners of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, with many of whom I maintain friendships to this day. It has also allowed me to gather a lot of valuable practical experience with the organisation of projects intended for young people of various origins and backgrounds. At the same time, the regular annual conferences have given me the opportunity to meet, observe and exchange with rectors and other representatives of higher education institutions and universities in the Danube Region. I have learned many things from all of them.

And in 2023, at the conjunction of the 40th anniversary of the DRC, the 70th anniversary of the IDM and – if it were not for the Covid-19 pandemic – the 20th anniversary of the DRC Summer School (to add to the anniversary round I turned 30 in summer), I have the honour of being responsible for this anniversary publication.

Resilience of the DRC Put to the Test

It is not as difficult to describe the developments of the last five years since the last anniversary publication in 2018 as it was challenging to experience them. If 2019 was still a peaceful year in which we could implement all DRC activities, then the following years fundamentally changed our plans. At the beginning of 2020, we monitored the gradual introduc-



tion of anti-Covid measures in the individual countries of our target region, and in order to support our member universities in the extraordinary and difficult times, such as the global pandemic, we developed a section on the DRC webpage where member universities could exchange their

experience, know-how and good practices in tackling the spread of Covid-19 and the subsequent introduction of different forms of distance learning.

Additionally, it soon became clear to us that our traditional on-site formats would be impossible to implement and that is why we have made sure that we have all the necessary equipment to transfer our formats to the virtual world. Ultimately, the pandemic restrictions prevented us from organising the summer school that was to be held at Uzhhorod National University in 2020 and 2021, as well as the DRC annual conferences, which in both years were held only virtually in cooperation with the University in Uzhhorod.

DRC Stands with Ukraine

When we thought that after two postponed editions it would finally be possible to organise a summer school, the entire world, and the Danube Region in particular, were shocked by the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The DRC network responded promptly to this situation. On the third day after the start of the invasion, the DRC presidency strongly con-

WE STAND WITH UKRAINE

DRC
Danube Rectors' Conference

The DRC Presidency stands with Ukraine.

Russia's aggression is not just a completely unjustified attack on Ukraine. It is an attack on all of us.

While we fear for the safety of our friends and partners at the universities across Ukraine, particularly our members Uzhhorod National University and Odessa National I. I. Mechnikov University, we ask our network for any support in these dark times.

We will continue our efforts and engagement with Ukraine throughout our several formats like the Danubius Awards, the DRC Summer School and the EUSTR.

demned in its official statement this unjustified attack on Ukraine, which it considers an attack on the entire democratic world. At the same time, it called on member universities to initiate all the support they could provide to universities and other educational institutions in Ukraine. Support from the DRC was also acknowledged with an official letter from both member universities in Ukraine – Uzhhorod National University and Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University.

The DRC presidency also decided to grant a scholarship for a several-month study or research stay at the DRC permanent secretariat to two students coming from these two universities (see page 36). Finally, although we were very much looking forward to organising a summer school in Uzhhorod, the war situation logically did not allow this project to be carried out in the end.

Project Implementation in Turbulent Times

Despite all the extraordinary, challenging developments in the DRC region – or because of them – the DRC has implemented several projects in recent years. In addition to the continuation of long-term financial support of scholarships such as the “Sharing Future” Artist in Residence scholarship of the International Elias Canetti Society in Ruse, Bulgaria, or scholarships for participation in two summer academies organised by the OeAD – Austria’s Agency for Education and Internationalisation – a project called “From Fictional to Functioning Democracy: Developing Concepts and Strategies for an Inclusive and Participatory Europe (FIFUDEM)” has been undertaken. The project sought to scrutinise the contexts and causes of illiberal, respectively *fictional* democracy and to develop concepts and strategies for strengthening liberal, respectively *functioning* democracy, whereas the DRC played the role of project partner for the dissemination of project results (see page 46).

Moreover, on the initiative of the DRC presidency, two projects were implemented in 2022: the DRC Strategic Foresight project and the DRC Initiative Fund. In the first project, conceptualised and implemented by the IDM (seat of the DRC Permanent Secretariat), a group of university students, early-stage researchers and young scientists from ten countries in the Danube Region conducted a strategic foresight and projected various future scenarios regarding the world of science, university and academia in the region of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe in the year 2040 (see page 40). The second project, funded by the DRC and coordinated by the University of Maribor, provided students of doctoral study programmes at DRC member universities with the possibility to obtain financial means for developing applicants’ projects, solutions and prototypes (see page 52).

Even Closer Involvement

With overlapping crises resonating especially in the Danube Region, it is difficult to predict what challenges the network will face in the next decade. Whether universities will be confronted with existential threats in the form of security risks, political pressures or energy self-insufficiency as we experienced during the past years, I firmly believe that we can overcome these challenges together with joint efforts. As the events of recent months in Ukraine showed us, cross-border, transnational cooperation and solidarity are capable of fundamentally changing not only the course of history but of saving those who urgently need to be saved. Therefore, I am also convinced that the DRC will gain even greater relevance in the coming years, as evidenced by its constantly growing number of members.

That is why we will also start the fifth decade of the DRC's existence with a strong involvement in the activities of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), when initiatives will be implemented within the framework of the Austrian EUSDR presidency and in line with its three thematic priorities: supporting the reconstruction process of Ukraine and EU enlargement, fostering research and innovation, as well as enhancing the green transition and digitalisation (see page 68).

The overlapping goals and networks of the DRC and IDM, as well as the location of the permanent secretariat at the IDM, are an excellent combination, enabling meaningful, complementary use of activities taking place in both organisations.





DRC President Rector Friedrich Faulhammer, Manager of the DRC Permanent Secretariat Daniel Martinek and DRC Secretary General Sebastian Schäffer during the Annual Conference at the University of Maribor in November 2022.

Growing by Supporting Each Other

At this point, I would like to thank everyone who has, in one way or another, been involved in the processes of the DRC, everyone with whom I had the honour to work and cooperate and especially those who accompanied me on this professional journey. I would especially like to mention Sebastian Schäffer, who opened the door to the world of the IDM and the DRC for me and who has always been a good mentor and supporter. Also deserving of words of thanks are all the members of the DRC presidency I was privileged to work with, as well as the countless number of project and summer school participants and colleagues at member universities who have made my past five years a truly unforgettable endeavour.

I would like to wish the DRC many successfully implemented activities, constant growth of its members and scientific community in the Danube Region and, finally, enough strength and resilience to overcome global challenges and regional discrepancies in the decades to come.

DRC Member Universities



Germany

Reutlingen University

Ulm University

Ulm University of Applied Sciences

Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (KU)

University of Regensburg

Deggendorf Institute of Technology

Johannes Kepler University Linz

Czech Technical University in Prague

Czech University of Life Sciences Prague

Czechia

University for Continuing Education KREMS

University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (BOKU)

University of Vienna

Montanuniversität Leoben

University of Graz

Graz University of Technology

Tomas Bata University in Zlín

Trnava University

Comenius University Bratislava

J. Selye University

Eötvös Loránd University

Semmelweis University

Austria

Hungary

Italy

University of Trieste

University of Primorska

Juraj Dobrila University of Pula

University of Nova Gorica

Slovenia

University of Maribor

Croatia

University of Zagreb

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University

University of Novi Sad

Bosnia and Herzegovina

University of Banja Luka

University of Tuzla

University of Zadar

University of Sarajevo

University of East Sarajevo

University of Mostar



Slovakia

Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra

Uzhhorod National University

Andrassy University Budapest

Corvinus University of Budapest

University of Oradea

Babes-Bolyai University

Technical University of Cluj-Napoca

University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Cluj-Napoca

Vasile Goldis Western University of Arad

"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad

West University of Timisoara

Banat University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I. of Romania" in Timisoara

University of Belgrade

University of Defence

Serbia

Kosovo

University of Prishtina

Ukraine

Moldova

Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava

Technical University of Moldova

Odesa National I. I. Mechnikov University

Romania

Transilvania University of Brasov

Bucharest Polytechnic University

University of Pitești

Spiru Haret University

National School of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest

University of Craiova

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest

Ovidius University of Constanta

"Angel Kanchev" University of Ruse

Bulgaria

DRC Summer School



During the last twenty years of the DRC Summer School's existence, more than 350 students, young scientists, experts and lecturers coming from 33 countries have participated in the project.



Fostering Youth in the Scientific Community of the Danube Region

Daniel Martínek, Manager of the DRC Permanent Secretariat



In 2023, we were to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the DRC Summer School. However, the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the world in 2020–2022 interrupted this continuity. But even before that, in the summer of 2019, we organised a summer school in Zagreb. At the invitation of the University of Zagreb, which was celebrating its 350th anniversary in 2019, the 16th summer school took place in Croatia’s capital from 30 June to 7 July 2019. The programme, entitled “Falling Walls – Moving Borders – Common House Europe?”, offered the participants lectures and workshops on four thematic areas:

- Collective Security or a New Cold War?
- The Common European Currency – Constant Crisis Management?
- From ‘Big Bang’ to ‘Brexit’
- From Homo Sovieticus to Homo Digitalis – Successful Transformation of Civil Society in CEE?

In addition, the participants in workshops designed future scenarios for the Danube Region in 2030 and made 30 recommendations for solving burning issues in higher education in the region. To get to know even more closely the culture and history of the host country, the young scientists also went on an excursion to Samobor, a colourful Croatian town near the Slovenian border, where they enjoyed the famous kremšnita and homemade gingerbread.

After a two-year break caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the 17th summer school, under the title “Shaping Tomorrow’s Research: What Future for Academia in the Danube Region?”, took place in Vienna from 10 to 16 July 2022. The whole programme of the summer school revolved around four general topics:

- Youth in Academia – Passive Listeners or Drivers for Change?
- University Autonomy and Academic Freedom – Regional Perspective(s)
- Education for a Brighter Future – Role of Research in Policymaking
- Learning and Mobility in the Shadow of the War – Considerations and Challenges

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, it was foreseen that the summer school would be implemented at Uzhhorod National University. The war that broke out in Ukraine made it, unfortunately, impossible to continue with Uzhhorod National University as a hosting organisation. Despite that, the rector of the university, Prof. Volodymyr Smolanka, welcomed the participants and expressed hope that the next summer school will take place in Uzhhorod. One of the highlights of the 17th edition was the keynote speech on academic freedom and democratic backsliding provided by Shalini Randeria, president and rector of the Central European University (CEU). Together with the participants of the summer school, podcast episodes were recorded, reflecting participants' opinions on the given topics of the day.

An integral part of each summer school is the cultural programme. In 2022, young scientists took a field trip to Krems in Wachau, which is one of the UNESCO “cultural landscape” world heritage sites and known for its stunning wine terraces supported by dry stone walls. Enjoying the boat trip and a relaxing lunch surrounded by the natural beauty of Krems, the trip was well received by the participants. The 17th summer school was unique in other respects as well. Alongside lectures, participants had the opportunity to attend the final conference of the joint project FIFUDEM (see page 46) as well as to meet the participants of the DRC Strategic Foresight project (see page 40). They presented their project results and received numerous insights and constructive feedback from the summer school participants, followed by a fruitful discussion about project questions. At the end of the intensive week in Vienna, of course, a visit to a traditional Heuriger was not missing.

Finally, the 18th edition of the summer school was organised for July 2023 under the umbrella topic “Transformation of Post-War Europe: Challenging Universities and Research in the Danube Region?”, where four main topics were discussed:

- Democratic Recovery in Wartime Europe
- Inclusion and Diversity in Times of War
- Digital is Taking Over – Threat or Opportunity?
- Towards European Strategic Autonomy

Not only were students and young scientists able to explore the lively city of Cluj-Napoca but they were also allowed to present their scientific results during workshop sessions. Once again, a cultural programme was also included. The trip to the salt mine in Salina Turda contributed to the dynamics of the summer school, but also the fact that the summer school was co-organised by three hosting universities (for the

After successfully completing a one-week intensive and interactive educational programme, young students, scientists and early-stage researchers are awarded a certificate.



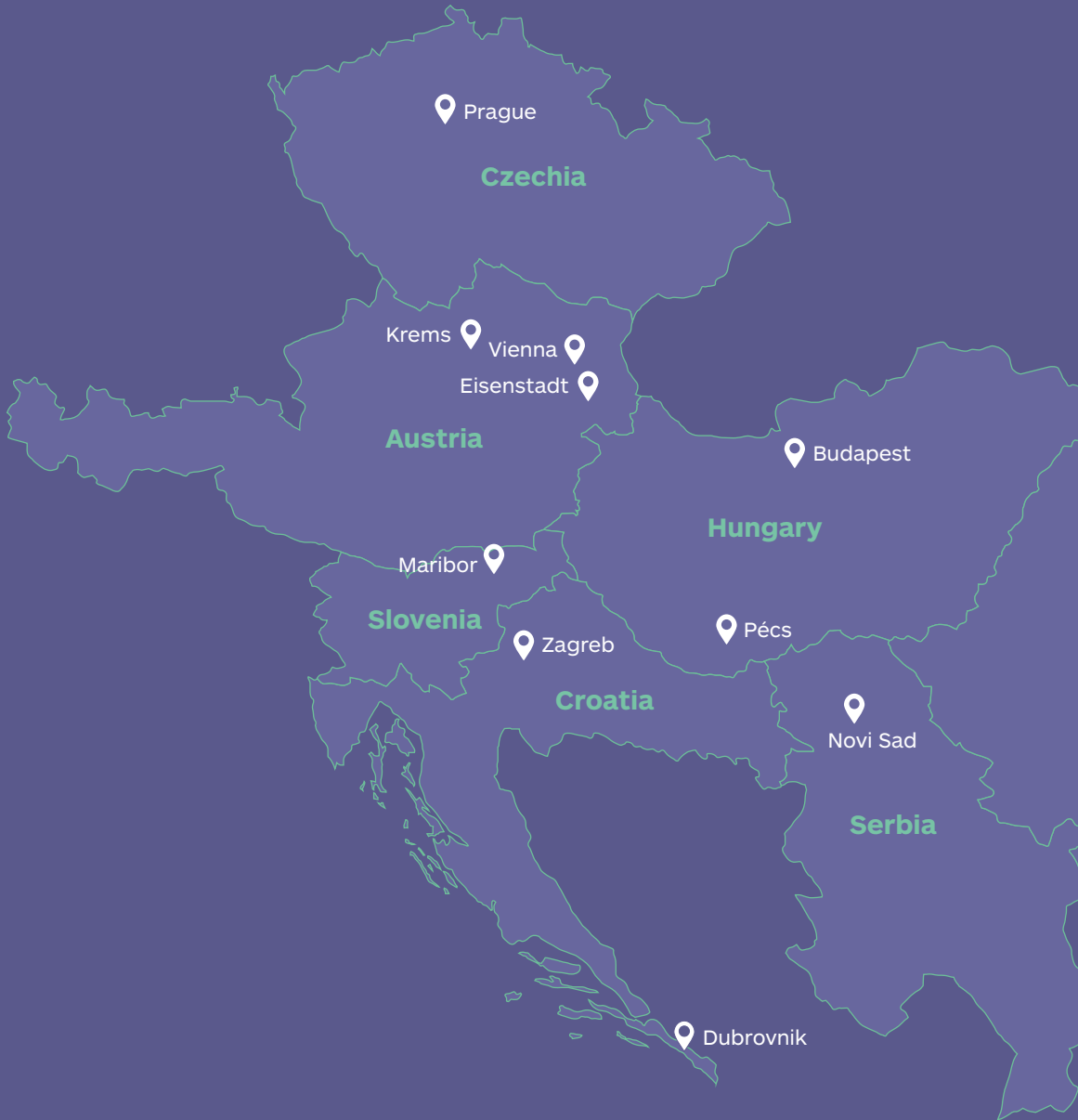
first time in DRC history); Babes-Bolyai University, the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca and the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine gave the participants the opportunity to visit three universities with diverse fields of focus.

During the last twenty years of the DRC Summer School's existence, more than 350 students, young scientists, experts and lecturers coming from more than 33 countries have participated in the format. Thirteen DRC member universities have served as hosts over the past twenty years. I wish this extraordinary project many successful editions in the future, innovative approaches to and fruitful discussions about the diverse topics of the Danube Region, and, most importantly, interest not only of the youth and scientific community to participate but also of current and future sponsors, without whom this format would not be financially feasible.

A social programme is an integral part of every DRC Summer School. In addition to other activities, the participants of the 2023 Summer School visited the former salt mine in Salina Turda near Cluj-Napoca.



DRC Summer Schools



1st DRC Summer School *The Europe of Regions for the Regions of Europe*, 8–14 August 2004 in **Pécs, Hungary**

2nd DRC Summer School *Social, Economic and Political Cohesion in the Danube Region in Light of EU Enlargement*, 4–12 July 2005 in **Eisenstadt, Austria**

3rd DRC Summer School *The Future of Europe – A View from the Danube Region*, 6–13 August 2006 in **Dubrovnik, Croatia**

4th Summer School *European Higher Education in a Changing World*, 22–29 July 2007 in **Pécs, Hungary**

5th DRC Summer School *Changing Dynamics of the Danubian Region – New Neighbourhood Policy in the EU*, 29 June – 6 July 2008 in **Krems, Austria**

6th DRC Summer School *Regime Change and Transition across the Danubian Region*, 5–12 July 2009 in **Budapest, Hungary**

7th DRC Summer School *The Western Balkans: Lessons from the Past and Future Prospects – A View from the Danube Region*, 25 July – 1 August 2010 in **Pécs, Hungary**

8th DRC Summer School *EU Strategy for the Danube Region – Perspectives for the Future*, 3–10 July 2011 in **Vienna, Austria**

9th DRC Summer School *Challenges for the European Union in the Next Decade – A View from the Danube Region*, 1–8 July 2012 in **Maribor, Slovenia**

10th DRC Summer School *Old Neighbours – New Policies in the Countries along the Danube and the Black Sea Region*, 7–14 July 2013 in **Budapest, Hungary**

11th DRC Summer School *1914–2014: 100 years after World War I – Chances and Challenges for the Danube Region*, 6–13 July 2014 in **Novi Sad, Serbia**

12th DRC Summer School *Recent Political Changes and their Implications in the Danube Region*, 5–12 July 2015 in **Vienna, Austria**

13th DRC Summer School *Post-Socialist Transformations in the Danube Region – 25 Years After the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, 3–10 July 2016 in **Prague, Czech Republic**

14th DRC Summer School *New Borders Between Old Neighbours – Return of History in the Danube Region?*, 2–9 July 2017 in **Pécs, Hungary**

15th DRC Summer School *Modernizing Europe: Generating Accountability*, 1–8 July 2018 in **Krems, Austria**

16th DRC Summer School *Falling Walls – Moving Borders – Common House Europe?*, 30 June – 7 July 2019 in **Zagreb, Croatia**

17th DRC Summer School *Shaping Tomorrow's Research: What Future for Academia in the Danube Region?*, 10–16 July 2022 in **Vienna, Austria**

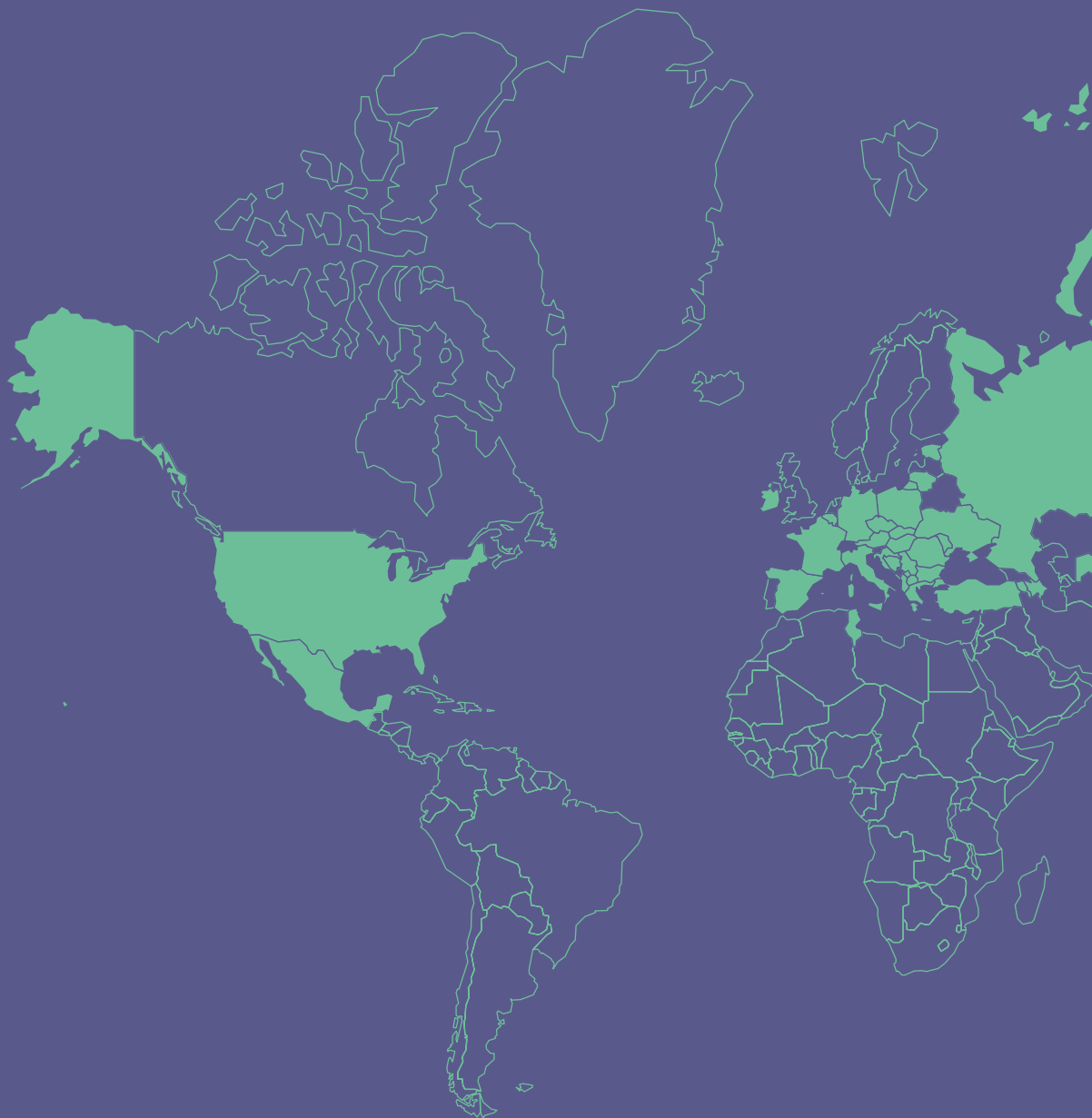
18th DRC Summer School *Transformation of Post-War Europe: Challenging Universities and Research in the Danube Region*, 16–22 July in **Cluj-Napoca, Romania**



Cluj-Napoca

Romania

Nationalities of the participants (33 countries)





- Albania
- Armenia
- Austria
- Azerbaijan
- Belgium
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Czech Republic
- Estonia
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Hungary
- Indonesia
- Italy
- Ireland
- Kosovo
- Lithuania
- Macedonia
- Mexico
- Moldova
- Poland
- Romania
- Russia
- Serbia
- Spain
- Slovakia
- Turkey
- Tunisia
- Ukraine
- Uzbekistan
- USA

Erhard Busek

” With his departure, the DRC has lost an important supporter, a promoter of an innovative approach to education and research, and a facilitator of international academic exchange and university cooperation. But above all, the DRC has lost its good friend.



A Good Friend of the DRC

Daniel Martínek, Manager of the DRC Permanent Secretariat



Science and education always occupied a special place in Erhard Busek's heart. He dedicated his personal and professional life to supporting universities, scientific institutions and educational facilities in general. In his position as minister of science and minister for education and cultural affairs, Busek was responsible for important organisational and study reforms of the Austrian academic landscape. Through his various positions in higher education, such as lecturer at Vienna University of Technology, chairman of the University Council of the Medical University of Vienna, rector of Salzburg University of Applied Sciences or visiting professor at Duke University in North Carolina, USA, he maintained close contact with the university environment throughout his whole political-academic career. Moreover, he was awarded the Jean Monnet Professorship ad personam, which he held at Salzburg University of Applied Sciences and the University of Graz.



Throughout his political career in various positions, Erhard Busek always supported innovations in education and development of science. He continued this course as the chairman of the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, endorsing every initiative implemented within the DRC. His unwavering passion and strong agency will remain to be a model for DRC leadership for the upcoming decades.



It is, therefore, not surprising that the higher education landscape of South-Eastern Europe was also of particular concern for Busek. In addition to his role as chairman of the supervisory board of the IEDC-Bled School of Management in Slovenia and as a patron of the Center for Advanced Studies Southeast Europe (CAS SEE) in Rijeka, Erhard Busek tirelessly supported the scientific community and institutions of higher education through the Danube Rectors' Conference. As chairman of the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM), where the DRC permanent secretariat is located, Busek oversaw, accompanied and broadly promoted all activities undertaken within the DRC network. When his other duties allowed him, he participated as a lecturer at the



Always present at the DRC Annual Conference, Erhard Busek never missed the network's annual meeting, in which he actively participated. For instance, he always expressed his curiosity in which fields the winners of the Danubius Awards excelled and heartily congratulated them at the award ceremony.

DRC Summer Schools and was a regular guest at the DRC annual conferences. His support of science, research and universities in the Danube Region is also evidenced by his strong involvement in the introduction of the Danubius Awards presented by the IDM and the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research since 2011, which has also been supplemented by the Danubius Young Scientist Awards since 2014 dedicated to the recognition of young, early-stage researchers.

With his departure, the DRC has lost an important supporter, a promoter of an innovative approach to education and research, and a facilitator of international academic exchange and university cooperation. But above all, the DRC has lost its good friend.

40 DRC X 70 IDM

” What is maybe a bit lesser known is that three decades before the DRC, the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) was founded in Salzburg. This coincidence of anniversaries might be worth mentioning to a certain extent, as their missions overlap significantly.



What Grows Together Goes Together

Sebastian Schäffer, DRC Secretary General and IDM Director



Two organisations, which have tremendously contributed to shaping and also changing the Danube Region, have their anniversaries this year. The Danube Rectors' Conference turns 40, which we all know by now as this publication is dedicated to it. What is maybe a bit lesser known is that three decades before the DRC, the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) was founded in Salzburg. This coincidence of anniversaries might be worth mentioning to a certain extent, as their missions overlap significantly.

While the IDM stresses the common cultural heritage of the people connected by the river as well as European values, which flourish through dialogue and discourse and are the key to a democratic, peaceful and sustainable European future, the DRC aims – according to its statute – “to promote cooperation on issues of common interest, thereby contributing to the stability and the development of an open and democratic society in Europe”.

10 years ago, the IDM became the permanent secretariat of the DRC, providing a home after travelling from university to university. While the presidency still does meander through the region, as does the DRC Summer School, some consistency has been provided through the connection of the two institutions. It is an honour and privilege to have been able to accompany and assist its development, and to continue doing so.

I'm also very lucky to have wonderful colleagues that are making the development possible. Here I would like in particular to mention Daniel Martinek, who was also involved in the compilation of the anniversary publication five years ago. Without him and his hard work for both the IDM and the DRC, I would certainly not be able to bridge the duties of being the director of one of the oldest German-speaking think tanks and the secretary general of one of the most diverse regional university networks.

We have overcome many challenges together throughout the last decade, some of which might have been enough for a whole century. In any case, I am looking forward to many more years of this cooperation, which proves that, ultimately, we are stronger together!

War in Ukraine

” The Ukraine fellowships offered jointly by the IDM and the DRC are a remarkable example of how, in times of war or crisis, this cooperation can create special opportunities to help people whose education is suffering from devastating disruption.



IDM / DRC Ukraine Fellowship

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had devastating consequences for the higher education sector in Ukraine. As a way to help Ukrainian higher education during this unprecedented time, the late chairman of the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM), Erhard Busek, proposed to finance a fellowship for a Ukrainian student or early-career researcher, whose studies have been interrupted by the war. The presidency of the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC) gladly followed up on the idea, adding together with the University for Continuing Education Krems a second scholarship, thus offering one each to the DRC's Ukrainian member universities.



"Vse bude Ukrajina!" – street graffiti in Kyiv, April 2023.

Two fellows were able to come and continue their studies or research at the IDM in Vienna. They also got the opportunity to gain insights into the work of a non-university research institute and regional think tank. The IDM thus provided a workplace and invited the fellowship holders to participate in the activities of the Institute as well as to contribute to the work of the IDM team members.



Olga Kyrychenko and Anastasiya Lendel, students from Ukraine, were supported by the IDM/DRC scholarship, which enabled them not only to come and stay in Vienna for several months, but also to explore daily work of a regional think tank like the IDM and at the same time to pursue their study activities.

The first fellow was **Olga Kyrychenko**, who is a PhD student at the Department of International Economic Relations of the Odesa Mechnikov National University. Before that, Olga graduated from the Odesa State Ecological University (Department of Ecology and Environmental Protection). From 2007 until 2021, she worked as managing production coordinator at Shipmodelling Centre “Albatros” Ltd. Olga was born in Odesa, is married and has a 5-year-old son. At the IDM, Olga worked on her dissertation: **“The Impact of International Tourism on the Socio-Economic Development of EU Countries”**. The main goal of the dissertation was to:

- research the impact of tourist arrivals on the economic and social development of different regions of the EU;
- study the most popular and profitable tourist destinations and develop recommendations for attracting tourist flows;
- implement the most successful tourism experience of European countries in the tourism development strategy in Ukraine.

The second fellow was **Anastasiya Lendel**, a student at Uzhhorod National University. She was also studying International Business at the University of Ljubljana. During her time at the IDM, Anastasiya worked on the project **“Ukrainian Universities in the Time of Global Crisis and New Opportunities: How to Secure and Develop Human Capital”**. Crisis periods have always been accelerators for a new phase of development. In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU granted Ukraine candidate status, which has opened space for new cooperation, reforms and opportunities for Ukraine in the education sector. Currently, two major issues are present:

- how to maintain the learning process during times of war;
- how to improve the education system for EU accession and strengthen the human and creative capital of the state.

In her research, Anastasiya investigated the experience of Western Balkan countries in the post-war period since the 1990s and proposed some practical examples of innovative reforms. Major ones included academic freedom, brain drain prevention and the involvement of EU investments and initiatives. Anastasiya was also able to attend the DRC Summer School in 2022. Although initially planned to take place in Uzhhorod, Ukraine, under the circumstances the summer school was instead hosted at the IDM in Vienna.

The Ukraine fellowships offered jointly by the IDM and the DRC are a remarkable example of how, in times of war or crisis, this cooperation can create special opportunities to help people whose education is suffering from devastating disruption. All DRC members have, in their own way, contributed to supporting Ukraine in an educational capacity over the last year, and the DRC/IDM Ukraine fellowship is just one example. For the fellowship holders, it was a great opportunity to come to Vienna and learn about the work of the IDM and DRC while also being able to continue their academic studies in a safe and supportive environment. The DRC remains committed to helping Ukraine at this time and we support higher education in Ukraine as a whole, but especially our two member universities: Odesa Mechnikov National University and Uzhhorod National University.

DRC Strategic Foresight

” As exceptional and diverse as the countries of the Danube Region and their complex socio-political systems are, in the case of science, research and higher education, there are specific areas that are burdened with similar barriers and challenges, yet also offer viable opportunities.



Navigating the Research and Education of Tomorrow

Why

Less than twenty years from now, can you imagine what our ever-shifting world will look like? Will knowledge, science and research take their rightful place in this world as seekers of truth and understanding? And what role will universities play in this process as research initiators, science champions and knowledge brokers?

In 2022, as part of the project **“The Future of Research and Higher Education in a Globalised World: A View from and for the Danube Region”**, we conducted a strategic foresight and projected various future scenarios regarding the world of science, university and academia in the region of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe in the year of 2040. We chose this year not only to find a suitable consensus between short-term and long-term projecting but also to provide current representatives of universities, decision-makers and other stakeholders with advice on what strategic pathways they should start to follow now and how they should decide within their scope of action. This is because we believe many university processes and policies in the region urgently require measures, and these must be taken now.

Urgency, together with the current and future relevance and gravity of the issue, were also important factors in the selection of specific thematic areas of the project. As exceptional and diverse as the countries of the Danube Region and their complex socio-political systems are, in the case of science, research and higher education, there are specific areas that are burdened with similar barriers and challenges, yet also offer viable opportunities. All these developments need our immediate attention and should be given suitable solutions.



What

There are four thematic areas within the project upon which strategic foresight was implemented and, additionally, policy recommendations were developed:

- University Autonomy and Governance
- Science and Learning in the Digital Era
- Scientific Research for European Decision-Making
- Employability of Students / Early-Stage Researchers

Who

The project focussed on engaging university students, early-stage researchers and young scientists in the debate around the future of higher education and research. Eighteen selected participants with different academic and professional backgrounds coming from ten countries of the Danube Region proved to be an excellent sample of young academics and experts. They have been able to adequately analyse future challenges and opportunities



The 17th edition of the DRC Summer School in 2022 was unique. The participants of the Summer School had the opportunity to meet the members of the Strategic Foresight project. This meeting and the subsequent interaction were an important part of the project, as valuable feedback on the semi-results of the project was given here by students and experts from the field.

of the academic, scientific and working world in the eastern part of the European continent. I am also convinced that they provide decision-makers with valuable projections on the future developments of higher education in the Danube Region from the unique perspective of young experts.

Unfortunately, the Russian invasion of Ukraine affected not only the organisation of project meetings but also the participation of project members. As the situation in their country did not allow them to participate in the physical meetings, our two male Ukrainian colleagues were forced to contribute to the entire project virtually. At this point, I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart not only them but also our other project members from Ukraine for their dedication, perseverance and their valuable contribution to the entire project despite the tragic and challenging conditions they were exposed to.

How

The DRC Strategic Foresight project was funded by the DRC and conceptualised, coordinated and implemented by the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM). Although the project coordinator tried to carry out the project in the form in which it was originally designed, external factors beyond one's control present an element that sometimes fundamentally changes the implementation of the project. This was the case with the DRC Strategic Foresight, in which three in-person meetings took place. In addition to Vienna, where the participants got to know each other and received crucial insights into the strategic foresight methodology, and Maribor, where this publication has been presented, we were also supposed to meet in Uzhhorod, Ukraine, in the framework of the 17th DRC Summer School. However, the major escalation of war in Ukraine ultimately did not allow Uzhhorod National University to host the 17th DRC Summer School.

Along with the three onsite meetings, several online meetings have been organised, during which the authors developed their future scenarios according to a specific strategic foresight methodology. Focusing on the year 2040, we firstly explored and analysed currently existing conditions and processes in the areas of higher education and research in the Danube Region, and identified the most significant trends and changes that, due to their importance and relevance, may have an impact and implications on the future of this sector in individual thematic areas. Building on this analysis and the identification of existing realities, several future scenarios were developed that represent different versions of the future of universities, academia and research in 2040. In doing so, four future versions were invented: probable, possible, preferable, and a wild card scenario.

Despite differing from traditional forecasting and desirable future predicting, as well as being based on the evidence of current trends, the presented futures were determined by outside-the-box, unconventional and creative thinking, which is of crucial importance in every strategic foresight. And while some predictions may seem unrealistic, the backcasting and formulation of policy recommendations, on the other hand, represent a set of well-thought-out steps and actions that should (or should not) be taken in order to achieve a particular future.



Project members during their first meeting in Vienna in March 2022. Eighteen young academics, researchers and experts coming from ten countries of the Danube Region proved to be an excellent sample for mapping out future scenarios and developing practical recommendations.

With whom

I am beyond grateful to and sincerely applaud all the project members. Despite their other personal and professional duties and obligations, they tirelessly and actively participated in all parts of the project, devoting their valuable time to it even beyond its schedule. Without their commitment, this endeavour would never have been realised and the final publication would never have seen the light of day. I am convinced that this symbiosis of their determination, distinct knowledge, rich experience and diverse backgrounds was the key to the creation of fascinating future scenarios and deliberated policy recommendations.

The project results should be an engaging read for all local, national and European decision-makers, stakeholders, university executives and staff, as well as the general public, and it should show everyone the different paths higher education and research in the Danube Region can take. Some of these paths are thorny, others are simple, some lead to a drastic transformation or the demise of universities as we know them, while others represent the bright future of the university as an open place enjoying institutional independence and scientific debate. Let this project contribute to the understanding of the main processes in higher education that lead to these various future realities of academia and research.

FIFUDEM Project



We have to let loose of this paradigm that democracy is a self-maintaining institution. Democracy needs to be nurtured and cared for in order for it to serve its function for our society in making government inclusive, fair, and progressive.



From Fictional to Functioning Democracy

In 2022, the IDM, in cooperation with the DRC, completed the project “From Fictional to Functioning Democracy: Developing Concepts and Strategies for an Inclusive and Participatory Europe” (FIFUDEM). The rationale behind the FIFUDEM project was based on the observation that liberal democracy has been eroding for years so that in some cases we could speak of fictional instead of functioning elements of democracies. Whereas the project focusses specifically on the region of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, events during the project period, such as the attack on the US Capitol or the severe repression of protesters in Hong Kong by the authorities, shed light on the global dimension of the problem.

Threats such as populism, attacks on the separation of powers as well as corruption are shared by both young and consolidated democracies. Nevertheless, countries of the Danube Region face region-specific issues regarding their geopolitical position, their historical legacies and not least the existing socio-economic disparities between old and new EU Member States and those waiting for potential EU accession. Based on this status quo, the project aimed to scrutinise the contexts and causes of so-called illiberal (fictional) democracy, to develop concepts and strategies for strengthening liberal (functioning) democracy and its functioning political communication as well as active citizenship in an inclusive and participatory EU. Furthermore, it followed the goal of disseminating the project’s findings through awareness-raising activities, events and publications for different target groups on the local, regional, national, international and EU levels.

The consortium aimed to conduct research on European integration and enlargement in its focus region and disseminate the project’s results through the international IDM publications, events, and network as well as through the network of the IDM project partner, the Danube Rectors’ Conference (DRC). All these various activities aimed to affect various segments of the public discourse on the importance of strengthening liberal and functioning democracy and supporting active citizenship in an inclusive and participatory European Union.



Purpose of the project

The key points of this IDM project were 1) to scrutinise the contexts and causes of illiberal (fictional) democracy, 2) to develop concepts and strategies for strengthening liberal (functioning) democracy and its functioning political communication as well as active citizenship in an inclusive and participatory EU, and 3) to disseminate the project's findings through awareness raising activities, events and publications for different target groups on the local, regional, national, international and EU level. The rationale behind this proposal comes from the worrying erosion tendencies of liberal democracy as well as from the increase of populism, extremism and religious radicalisation in the Danube Region and Central Europe.

All these developments pose challenges to European integration and may be defined as “tribalism”. No matter which form of xenophobia and extremism, if politically or religiously connoted and legitimised, tribalism jeopardises hitherto established European standards of liberal democracy, checks and balances, and the rule of law. Processes of integration are even more challenged by the lack of a European public sphere. At the same time,



Part of the 17th DRC Summer School 2022 was the conclusion meeting of the FIFUEM project. During the discussion on the topic “Functioning Democracy in the Making”, f.l.t.r. Daniel Martínek (IDM), Melanie Jandl (IDM), Thomas Prorok, Managing Director of the KDZ – Centre for Public Administration Research, Dobrena Petrova, Research Associate and Project Assistant at the Sofia Platform, and Sebastian Schäffer elaborated on the project results and final recommendations.

ostracism of critical media and journalists threatens press freedom in many places and forces the national filter of Europe in national media.

Final Conference of the Project

During the 17th DRC Summer School in 2022, all participants had the opportunity to attend the final conference of the project. The conference presented the findings and activities on specific political and societal challenges of democratisation and Europeanisation in the countries of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe and provided a variety of in-depth problem analyses and practical policy recommendations.

“We have to let loose of this paradigm that democracy is a self-maintaining institution. Democracy needs to be nurtured and cared for in order for it to serve its function for our society in making government inclusive, fair, and progressive. We should abandon the phrasing of a “dying democracy” as this notion indicates that our democracy has already reached a stage where all efforts are being wasted.” – Daniela Ingruber during the lecture “Democracy Dies in Darkness – does it?”.

Participants of the meeting of Jean Monnet projects' representatives at the "30 years of Jean Monnet Activities" conference in Brussels in June 2019. The FIFUEM project was one of the supported projects within the Jean Monnet programme.





**JEAN MONNET
ACTIVITIES
30 YEARS
OF EXCELLENCE
IN EU STUDIES**



**Erasmus+
30 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE IN EU STUDIES**

- 5000 funded projects
- 1/4 Million students benefiting every year
- 9000 university teachers involved
- 1000 universities involved
- Present in 87 countries
- Fostering dialogue between policy-makers and academic world
- Promoting outreach to teachers and learners
- Reinforcing EU literacy and passing on knowledge to the young generations

DRC Initiative Fund

Empowering Research and Innovation

Zdravko Kačič, DRC Vice-President & Rector of the University of Maribor

Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC) has followed the realisation of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (further-on the Strategy) since its adoption in the end of 2010. As the named strategy recognises the DRC as active stakeholder in the process of realisation, the DRC follows the development in the field of the priority area titled Knowledge Society dealing with one of the main mission of universities – research. It is a consistent part of the pillar Prosperity, with two more priority areas: Competitiveness – knowledge transfer and innovation – and Human Resources – education and training.



In the mentioned priority area Knowledge society, the member states of the Strategy adopted six targets to be reached in this decade. Danube Rectors' Conference identified three that should be tackled directly by the DRC Initiative Fund:

1. researcher mobility in the Danube Region
2. innovation in the Danube Region and
3. (joint) scientific publications by authors from the Danube Region.

The background of the targets above is the recognition that the Danube Region is lacking tighter cooperation among higher education institutions and thus neglects the very great potential of a possible joint research infrastructure, a stronger combination of human resources within a broader addressing the major societal challenges of our time, which results in a low spread of knowledge and innovation among the population of the Danube Region and broader compared to more developed regions already on PhD level. This is evident from the comparatively low number of scientific publications with high impact factor as well as the low number of patent applications and licensing of innovation compared to more developed European and other regions of the world.

To set a sign and to obtain more insight into the situation in the Danube Region, the Presidency of the Danube Rectors' Conference, based on the proposal by the rector of the University of Maribor Prof. Dr. Zdravko Kačič, suggested to the General Assembly to approve the fostering of

PhD student's projects from DRC member universities. The Assembly approved the project named "DRC Initiative Fund" in the amount of €50,000. Never before has the DRC dedicated such an amount to a single project and invested in a direct target set in the Strategy.

The target group was selected due to the fact that at the level of PhD or doctoral studies, all three missions of a university come together and can be combined in the most effective way: research, as doctoral studies are mainly research based; education, as doctoral studies embody also the learning of research methods, acquaintance with existing knowledge and the path towards own discoveries and development; and finally innovation, as the findings of a PhD student ideally should culminate in something new and unprecedented.

Thus, by the mandate of the General Assembly, the team of the University of Maribor prepared a call for applicants to dedicate means for PhD students within their doctoral studies to make the experience of performing a part of their study and/or research at another institution in the Danube Region and in this way obtain an (additional) element of internationalisation in their programme. Applications were to be sent online and could be made to one, two or all three above-mentioned activities. In this way, a student successfully applying to all three targets, i.e. to be mobile, to publish results and to enter the process of patenting or other commercialisation, could obtain a grant of €5,000. The call was published on the DRC website, in the DRC Newsletter and was sent to identified institutional doctoral schools and international relations offices of the DRC member universities.

The result was very positive. Almost 50 doctoral students applied to the call despite the short deadline. Applications were of a high quality and selection by the jury consisting of the DRC Presidency was not easy. However, the scoring system flanking the call enabled a ranking, so the first 15 candidates could be selected and were informed of their success. Finally, 14 doctoral students started their projects in the fields of various scientific areas dealing mainly with environmental or societal topics and shall present their results to the Danube rectors on the occasion of the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the DRC.

Danubius Award Winners



The Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) and the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) created the Danubius Award in 2011 with the intention of honouring people with extraordinary achievements in their scientific activity and output in relation to the Danube Region.



2022

Diana Mishkova

History professor and director of the Centre for Advanced Study (CAS), Bulgaria

2021

Josef Glöbl

Univ.-Prof. for Applied Genetics at the Institute for Plant Biotechnology and Cell Biology at the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna (BOKU), Austria

2020

Andrei Pippidi

Historian and professor emeritus,
University of Bucharest, Romania

2019

Jiří Balík

Professor of Agrochemistry and Plant Nutrition,
University of Life Sciences Prague, Czech Republic

2018

Béla Greskovits

Political scientist, Central European University (CEU)
Budapest, Hungary

2017

Maroš Finka

Spatial planner, Slovak Technical University Bratislava,
Slovak Republic

2016

Ingeborg Fialová

Germanist, Palacky University Olomouc, Czech Republic

2015

Leopold März

Professor of Biochemistry, University of Natural
Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU)

2014

András Inotai

Economist, Institute of World Economy of the Hungarian
Academy of Sciences

2013

Miroslav J. Vesković

Nuclear physicist, University of Novi Sad

2012

Klaus Roth

Ethnologist, LMU Munich

Danubius Mid-Career Award Winners

2022

Tamara Martsenyuk

Associate professor, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine

2021

Tanja Dabović

Associate professor, Faculty of Geography, University of Belgrade, Serbia

2020

Daniela Dolenec

Political scientist, Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb, Croatia

2019

Silvija Krajter Ostoić

Research associate, Croatian Forest Research Institute, Jastrebarsko, Croatia

2018

Ana Hofman

Senior research associate, Institute for Cultural and Memory Research, Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Testimonials

” I highly recommend and encourage everyone to apply for the Danubius Young Scientist Award; it will most probably change your life in ways you didn't imagine. For me, it was the launch of my career, of international collaboration and, more importantly, a self-development adventure.



Danubius Young Scientist Award Winners



Andreea-Maria Câmpu

Country of origin Romania

Affiliation and work institution Nanobiophotonics and Laser Microspectroscopy Centre, Interdisciplinary Research Institute in Bio-Nano-Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

Field & Research Natural sciences

As a Danubius Young Scientist Awardee, I can honestly say that it is an honour to be recognised and appreciated by the international community with such a prestigious award, which represents for me a special recognition of the quality and impact of my work as well as a confidence and ambition incentive to further pursue my passions. It is a full experience combining personal, cultural, social and scientific involvement from the exciting award ceremony to the visit at the JRC in Ispra, Italy.

The award had a significant direct impact on my scientific career, consolidating my expertise and leading to successful funding and research applications – one in collaboration with the JRC research facility in Ispra. I highly recommend and encourage everyone to apply for the Danubius Young Scientist Award; it will most probably change your life in ways you didn't imagine. For me, it was the launch of my career, of international collaboration and, more importantly, a self-development adventure.

Jelena Vladić

Country of origin Serbia

Affiliation and work institution

Nova School of Science and Technology,
NOVA University Lisbon, Portugal

Field & Research Tech & Engineering –
Pharmaceutical engineering



Being a laureate of the Danubius Young Scientist Award represents a great honour and a remarkable milestone in one's scientific career because it indicates that you belong to a productive, creative, and innovative group of scientists from the Danube Region and beyond. I believe that the support and recognition coming from the institutions is necessary for a successful scientific career because it validates dedication and invested work and contributes to your personal and professional motivation and confidence.

For me, this award elevated the visibility of my scientific work and helped me reach a broader audience, which further brought me numerous regional and international collaborations and joint successful projects. Consequently, it helped me broaden the creative and innovative aspects of my research and increased my scientific impact. Altogether, the award encouraged me to apply for new opportunities and to continue contributing to the field of science.

Tibor Zsigmond

Country of origin Slovakia

Affiliation and work institution

J. Selye University (JSU), Faculty of Economics and Informatics, Komárno, Slovakia

Field & Research Social Sciences



I am Tibor Zsigmond, an assistant professor at the J. Selye University (JSU), Faculty of Economics and Informatics in Komárno, Slovakia. My main area is emotional intelligence in corporate environments. I have won several regional

awards in Slovakia, but the greatest recognition of my work was winning the “Danubius Young Scientist Award” in 2022. This helped me to get even more recognition within JSU; there was an article at the university website about the ceremony. This piqued the interest of my colleagues, with whom I shared my positive experiences with pleasure.

I have successfully applied for a new contract at JSU, while highlighting the “Danubius Young Scientist Award” as the most important recognition of my work. Furthermore, I am grateful for being one of the lucky ones who could participate in DRC Summer School 2023”. These two events were great for building professional relationships. We are already planning to meet each other at conferences in the near future.



Mariana Rosca

Country of origin Moldova

Affiliation and work institution

Transylvania University of Brasov, Romania

Field & Research Social Sciences

Winning the 2019 Danubius Young Scientist Award was one of my greatest achievements, as it recognised the work and dedication I have put into my academic work, both nationally in the Republic of Moldova and internationally. The DYSA has opened up exciting new opportunities for collaboration, broadened my networks, and provided me with invaluable experience participating in the award ceremony.

For me, both on a personal and professional level, DYSA became an important milestone. To cite just a few of my career advancements, such as Marie Curie Ph.D. with international mention, board member of the Marie Curie Alumni Association, and the seal of excellence for the current postdoc project. Therefore, winning this award has given me a significant boost of confidence and reinforced my motivation to pursue my academic goals and aspirations.

DRC Podcast

” The DRC podcast episodes were an excellent, one-of-a-kind opportunity both for the IDM team, who had direct access to the participants’ experiences in higher education, and for the participants themselves, who certainly gained precious knowledge about podcast production and invaluable memories from the recording.

Voices of students and researchers from the Danube Region

In 2022, the 17th edition of the DRC Summer School took place in Vienna, home to the DRC Secretariat and the IDM. This edition offered students the opportunity to get hands-on experience in podcast recording through an interactive workshop.

In the workshop sessions, the participants had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with podcast production. Supported by IDM Research Associate Emma Hontebeyrie, the summer school participants defined and recorded content about current hot topics and analysed the main challenges and opportunities related to the four thematic areas of the summer school: University Autonomy and Governance; Science and Learning in Digital Era; Scientific Research for European Decision-Making;



During the 17th DRC Summer School, the participants were divided into groups and worked on specific topics related to the future of higher education and research in the Danube Region. The results were then recorded within the DRC podcast series.

and Employability of Students/Early-Stage Researchers. As a result, the content produced was embedded as part of the new season of the IDM's podcast, Central Europe Explained (CEE).

The first episode that was recorded with the help of the IDM's team and the summer school participants was called "Passive Listeners or Actors for Change?" and tackled engagement as a key driver of students' personal development, looking at what engagement means, and what role youth plays in academia. The second episode was about "Education for a Brighter Future" and looked at the structure of our social system relying on the important triumvirate encompassing science and academia, policymakers, and civil society. In recent years, EU citizens have witnessed a weakening of the relationship between these elements, a lack of communication and a serious loss of trust between these three elements, notably with civil society growing more and more suspicious of politicians and academia.



Every moment was used to record impressions from the interactive discussions on the burning issues from the field of academia and research, which revolved around the main topics of the one-week programme of the summer school.



The development of the DRC podcast series during the 17th summer school in July 2022 was carried out in a friendly spirit. Emma Hontebeyrie, IDM podcast producer, during the recording in the IDM library.

The third episode focussed on the question “Is University in Exile the Future of Central Europe?”. It discussed how this direct attack on university autonomy was an example of the current fight of academic institutions for their freedom, following diverse narratives from actors in academia. The fourth enlightening podcast collaboration discussed “Learning and Mobility in the Shadow of War”, including unequal access to education and freedom of movement in the difficult context of the Russian military attack on Ukraine. The four DRC podcast episodes were an excellent, one-of-a-kind opportunity both for the IDM team, who had direct access to the participants’ experiences in higher education, and for the participants themselves, who certainly gained precious knowledge about podcast production and invaluable memories from the recording.

Joint Research Centre

” The Danube Region is moving forward, but its success is not solely a result of its infrastructure but also of the skills and dedication of its young scientists. Therefore, the crucial role of universities must be recognised and supported.



Successful Cooperation between the DRC and the European Commission

Miroslav Vesković, Former Coordinator of Scientific Support to Macro-regional Strategies at the DG Joint Research Centre of the European Commission



From the infancy of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC) – the largest university network in the Danube Region – has actively contributed to it. During the 26th DRC annual meeting in Novi Sad in 2010, intensive discussions with over 30 rectors of member universities resulted in the signing of an extraordinary document – the Novi Sad Declaration, unanimously adopted by the DRC General Assembly. The DRC invited the largest international academic community in Europe, consisting of about 300 universities, to be actively involved in the development and implementation of the Strategy of the European Union for the Danube region. It recognised that the purpose and main value of macro-regional strategies are in cooperation, crossing sectors and bringing together different actors. The Declaration insisted that strong human capital is needed not just to provide expert knowledge in one field but to think and act across disciplines.

In 2012, the DRC and the European Commission's science and knowledge service – the Directorate General Joint Research Centre (EC DG JRC) – signed the Letter of Intent “sharing the view that there is a great potential for cooperation between the respective organisations”. The Danubius Award, created in 2011 by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research (BMWF), the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) and the DRC, honours individuals with extraordinary scientific achievements related to the Danube Region in the fields of humanities, social sciences and cultural studies are awarded in one year, and achievements in the field of life sciences in the following year. The JRC has participated in the annual award ceremony since 2014, and each year we invite the winners of the Danubius Young Scientists Award to visit the JRC to learn more about scientific support for the Danube Strategy, visit JRC labs, and shadow a JRC scientist.

The Danube Region is moving forward, but its success is not solely a result of its infrastructure but also of the skills and dedication of its young scientists. Therefore, the crucial role of universities must be recognised and supported.

Slovenian and Austrian Presidency of the EUSDR

” Together, we can actively shape the Danube Region’s transformation and create opportunities to make this part of Europe a prosperous, resilient and safe home for all. I am convinced that the DRC will play a pivotal role as a bridge between the research and its regional implementation in the decades to come.



Looking to the Future



Friedrich Faulhammer, DRC President & Rector of the University for Continuing Education Krems



Zdravko Kačič, DRC Vice-President & Rector of the University of Maribor

Becoming an integral part of the revised European Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Action Plan in 2020, the importance and relevance of the DRC have been recognised by the European Commission as well as by other important stakeholders in the Danube Region and beyond. In November 2022, the EUSDR presidency was taken over by Slovenia. During the Slovenian presidency, the DRC played a crucial role in the organisation and conducting of events in the field of the priority Knowledge Society and will contribute to the annual forum in Brdo pri Kranju on 24 and 25 October 2023.

The Slovenian presidency of the EUSDR emphasises four institutional priorities (Embedding, Youth, Stakeholder Inclusion, Widening) and two contentious priorities (Knowledge Society, and Connectivity). One of the two contentious priorities is Knowledge Society, where the DRC plays an active and contributory stakeholder role. At the conference in Brdo pri Kranju, organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Economy with speakers from the OECD, European Commission and national institutions, as well as the priority area coordinators, Prof. Dr Kačič, vice-president of the DRC, presented the conclusions of the Annual DRC Conference in Maribor from November 2022.

All participants coming from universities, ministries and other stakeholders of the EUSDR activities agreed that the region needs to upscale the performance of the Knowledge Society in aspects of the targets in this area, mainly to increase researcher mobility and the amount of innovation and joint scientific publications by students and researchers from the region. These items are addressed in the latest activities of the DRC, mainly the DRC Strategic Foresight Project and the DRC Initiative Fund. The DRC

continues to actively contribute to the Knowledge Society priority and is open for further cooperation within the management of the EUSDR in its fields of science, higher education and human resource development (prosperity pillar of the EUSDR) in order to send a message to our youth that the Danube Region is a region worth planning their own future in, and worthy of their talent.

As a well-established and well-connected structure of higher education institutions representing one of Europe's most important and diverse educational organisations, the DRC will also pursue its mission during the Austrian presidency of the EUSDR. Building on the successful involvement of the DRC in the EUSDR's activities, the network will continue through its member universities to foster higher education, research and innovations in the Danube Region. Moreover, in line with the thematic priorities of the Austrian presidency, the DRC will further contribute to the EU enlargement and integration efforts by promoting academic exchange and inter-institutional university cooperation. Through the primary mission of the universities, i.e. to support science, push the boundaries of knowledge and open the potential of innovation, the network will continue to support its members on their way to building the skills and competencies of the population and enlarging the scientific community in the Danube Region – following once again the priorities of Austrian presidency in 2024.

As part of the official calendar of the EUSDR, the DRC will support educational and youth activities planned under the Austrian presidency. As DRC president and rector of the University for Continuing Education Krems, I endorse the 2024 DRC Annual Meeting to take place in Vienna. On the important occasion of fifteen years since the initiative to establish the EUSDR was taken by Austria and Romania and ten years after the first Austrian EUSDR presidency, I invite representatives not only of the DRC member universities but also of the EUSDR working groups and other stakeholders from the Danube Region to join us in Austria's capital. Together, we can actively shape the Danube Region's transformation and create opportunities to make this part of Europe a prosperous, resilient and safe home for all. Such a transformation cannot, however, be achieved without the involvement of universities and research institutions. I am convinced that the DRC will play a pivotal role as a bridge between the research and its regional implementation in the decades to come.

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