



Ms Danuta Hübner
Chair of the Committee on Regional Development
"EU Strategy for the Danube Region"
MEP Danube Forum
Thursday, 9 December 2010
Brussels

Ladies and Gentleman,

An important part of work is behind us. The European Commission has just adopted the Communication on European Union Strategy for the Danube Region and its Action Plan. It will be endorsed by the Council in April and by the Summit in June. Today, I participate with great pleasure in this Danube Forum, organised by fellow honourable colleagues. Let me express my special gratitude to Ms Silvia Adriana Țicău for getting us, parliamentarians, together for this debate.

After the successful launch of the Baltic Sea Strategy - which as a Commissioner for Regional Policy I deeply endorsed and promoted - on Council's request the preparations for a similar macro-regional strategy for the Danube area were initiated. It is, therefore, our second experience with the new opportunities. It is my belief that this concept of flexible geography is better placed to

address the current economic, social and environmental challenges that we face in Europe.

The rationale behind this strategy is clear. There were reasons to prepare it. What is important is that all those factors that "pushed" us towards the strategy have grown in importance. On the one hand, these new challenges do not recognise either administrative or political borders - take for instance climate change - but they require shared solutions. The prerequisite for these shared solutions is indeed the achievement of deeper territorial cooperation as well as ensuring efficiency and effectiveness of existing programmes and projects. The adoption of this new territorial approach does not only require the active participation of all stakeholders, but it also implies the coordination between different policy fields. New links have to be developed. Transport, energy, environment, innovation, employment and education policy instruments are all complementary and need to be combined in the most effective and efficient way in order to achieve the desired results.

Through the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, and by building on the existing cooperation mechanisms, including the international and intergovernmental bodies, countries can agree on a common vision for the future and implement jointly some concrete actions. This can make EU economy stronger, help us get out of the crisis and put economies on a path of long term growth.

There are huge differences within the Danube area. With the crisis we can see even better how important cooperation is. There are

the challenges of the EU2020 strategy. The Danube Region comprises of fourteen states, eight of which are members of the EU. The common objective is to better use the potential which is there and to establish through the Danube Strategy a framework for sustainable cooperation between countries and regions, with programmes carefully drawn up in order to fit Europe 2020 Strategy priorities. The Danube Strategy represents a unique opportunity for the reduction of disparities within the region and enhancing economic development and competitiveness.

We want though preparatory stage process which has its own value: Member States, regions, cities, stakeholders, most of DGs and European Parliament. The Action Plan adopted by the European Commission that we have today in our hands is the concrete evidence of the progress that has already been made concerning the European Strategy for the Danube Region. It is the outcome of a broad consultation period between the European Commission, all administrative levels in the Member States of the region as well as various stakeholders. We created an integrated, cooperative partnership. It is of vital importance that this integrated partnership approach be also reflected in the implementation of the Strategy, so that the actions proposed by the Commission become concrete programmes, tailor-made in order to better address the realities and specific needs of each region.

As a Member of the European Parliament and Chairwoman of the Committee on Regional Development, I could not be more delighted to note that the propositions made by the European Parliament in its resolution on a European Strategy for the Danube

Region were taken into consideration and are reflected in the final document. We will continue to be involved.

There are 4 pillars of the Strategy. Improving the **connections** within the Danube Region constitutes the first 'pillar' of the Action Plan. There is a clear need to take action in the field of transport, paying particular attention in navigability of the river, interconnections and intermodal ports. These projects should be designed in a sustainable, environment-friendly way. Moreover, the issue of energy is of utmost importance for the region. Investments in pipelines, interconnections and the promotion of renewable sources of energy would not only lead towards energy efficiency but would also lift the environmental burden from a river with harsh pollution problems. Last but not least, the first 'pillar' includes provisions for the sectors of culture and tourism. I am convinced that the Danube Region has great potential, especially in the development of cultural tourism and ecotourism.

The second 'pillar' of the Action Plan refers to the protection of the **environment**. Stemming from the nature of the region, its biodiversity and the link between nature and economic potential, special attention is given to the sustainable use and the quality of waters. The recent incidents of floods in Romania and the industrial accident in Hungary constitute characteristic examples of problems in the Danube Region which call for immediate and coordinated action. Projects in environmental protection could draw on existing actions, such as the River Basin Management Plan and could also develop new joint actions.

Achieving **economic development** in the region is the third 'pillar' of the Action Plan, an objective that could be reached through the promotion of knowledge society. Given the fact that the Danube area includes both highly innovative regions - such as Baden-Württemberg (DE) - as well as regions with lagging innovative capacity, it is substantial that more emphasis be put on the implementation of Research and Development, Education and Employment policies. The industrial tissue of the region, SMEs especially, could become more competitive through the promotion of clusters as well as investments in human capital. The track record of investments in innovative activities in the Region is indeed very low, with only few countries spending more than the 3% minimum of their GDP. If we want the Danube Region to become more competitive and attractive to private investments, this trend has to change.

Finally, the fourth 'pillar' of the Action Plan concerns strengthening the Region in terms of **institutional capacity for cooperation, security and free mobility of persons and goods**. It requires the close cooperation and coordination of efforts between all countries in the Danube Region, both those being EU Member States and the Non-EU countries. Here territorial cohesion is also reinforced through cross-border cooperation activities and the administrative coordination between different legislatures. Freedom in movement of people and goods would also facilitate the process of economic and social integration in the Danube Region, through the exchange of knowledge and information.

Implementation mechanism

I consider the present Action Plan on the European Union Danube Strategy an excellent basis for further action, both for the European level as well as for the national, regional and local levels. Each should take their respective part of responsibility. The Danube Strategy is a collective strategy which requires the involvement of the multi-level governance and partnership approach. Let us not forget that it was a bottom-up initiative which gives all parts involved a valuable sense of ownership and responsibility.

I welcome the leading role that the European Commission has undertaken for the coordination of all action and the creation of a High Level Group to assist these efforts. Nevertheless, Member State commitment is crucial. It is their responsibility to organise appropriately the actions in each Priority Area and coordinators from each priorities areas and create National Contact Points. Consequently, the involvement of all government levels - from the EU-level to the local - in the implementation of the Action Plan is crucial for the success of the Strategy.

It is a living strategy and it is a living Action Plan. It is also true that in principle no additional funding can be provided for the implementation of the Danube Strategy. The existing financial instruments from the EU budget available across the territory can be used in a more efficient way within the framework of the strategy. It is more effective mobilisation and better coordination that is required. We should make the best of the funds that we already have in place and they are numerous. For instance, EUR 100 billion are available for the Region via the Structural Funds for

the 2007-2013 Programming period, as well as significant IPA and ENPI funds. In addition, the existing EIB instruments are also available and the experience from their use in the Baltic Sea Strategy has brought a good practice. Additionally, what will be particularly important for the achievement of the objectives of the Strategy, is the efficient use of national, regional and local resources. Combining different financial instruments from public and private sources below the EU-level is crucial, and in this context Member States and regions should draw on existing good practices of synergies between instruments, and the Commission should facilitate information and exchanges in this regard.

Finally, I would like to draw our attention to the European added value that the Danube Strategy creates. What we learned from the implementation of the Baltic Sea Strategy, is that only through our joint efforts will the objectives for economic, social and territorial cohesion become possible.

Thank you for your attention.