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Opening speech
"From Planning to action in the EU strategy for the Danube Region"
General Assembly of the Danube Civil Society Forum

Thursday, 30 June 2011
Esterhazy Palace, Eisenstadt, Austria

A year and a half year ago, in Ulm, when we were at the beginning of the exciting journey towards Danube Strategy, I said that the very process on working on the strategy has a huge value added. It can strengthen political and social capital needed to look through a concerted effort for common solutions and to implement them. And I also said that we had to involve civil society of this part of Europe in the process of constructing Danube Strategy. I said that you should be involved in preparing and implementing the Strategy because this would give you the feeling of ownership and responsibility and it would strengthen you.

And I remember bringing two guys together during the break in the conference - Stefan Lütgenau who had poured his concerns on me before Ulm meeting and DG REGIO Director General Dirk Ahner. I feel a little bit not only the mother of the Strategy but also of your Forum. Thank you, Stefan, for bringing me here.

The Action Plan of the Strategy is very clear on your role. It says that an active and strong civil society, participating in dialogue among strategy partners, facilitating solutions, ensuring support for some actions is crucial for the success of the Strategy. But you have to look at yourselves, measure your strength, identify your weaknesses and also reflect on how the Strategy can strengthen you. You also have to build among all stakeholders trust in your capacity to play the role you have acquired.

I am saying this because your duty is not only the Strategy, important as it is. Your role goes beyond this Strategy. I have read your position paper, I see the seriousness of your approach and I wish you all the best. I am convinced that we all are in a win-win situation - between you and strategy. The strategy and the people it serves will benefit from your involvement. But I believe your involvement will strengthen your capacities as Forum as well as those of your individual members. And I am convinced that Europe needs a strong civil society around Danube.

Why do I say this? Because I believe, and perhaps not everybody has noticed it yet, that the European landscape is changing. The citizen's concerns, like the climate change, energy efficiency, nuclear power, environment, all impacts on our feeling of

security - marginalized not so long ago in the political discourse – now are coming to the fore of the dialogue on the European leadership level. When the idea of the political leaders' summits was born in Rambouillet in the 70'ties, nobody would even dare come to the summit with those kinds of issues. Now the European institutional dialogue is shaped to a large extent by the demands, aspirations and expectations of the civil society – and this is a great achievement.

Especially now, in the post-crisis time, we need the legitimacy for our policies that can come only with the broad agreement of the people. The major challenges that are before us are: ensuring sustainable development, taking advantage of the opportunity resulting of migration, making the best of the changing demographics of the European societies, giving the representation to marginalized groups like the Roma people - all these are issues that touch every person across Europe.

There are many challenges that overwhelm the capacity of any individual country to deal with them. That is why the broad-based cooperation is needed. The Danube strategy is one of the promising venues for developing the European capacity to meet those challenges and to turn them into opportunities enriching our continent.

It so happened in the history of humanity that rivers were always vehicles for openness, for dialogue, for intercultural exchange. Danube, due to its history, is one of the rivers most deserving the title of the “rivers of dialogue”. The Danube strategy is the extension of this long tradition of cooperation and mutual support between those for whom Danube was a source of economic and cultural vitality. We want it to become one of the most important elements of the European transport network, people and environment –friendly. We also want the Danube region to become an area of reinforced cooperation, security and free exchange of people and commodities.

Thanks to its diverse composition the region has also a chance of becoming one of the centers for exchanging good practices in governance, strengthening the educational aspect of integration and active citizenship, also in terms of intercultural dialogue. It has a potential, in terms of people and resources, to be one of the most creative hubs of the continent.

For the future of Europe it is important that all of its citizens feel needed and valued members of the civil society, not only in their countries, but more and more on the continental scale. Hungary which is ending today its presidency of the Union asked us in its beginning to “undertake the strategic action that would focus on human dimension of the European integration”. I think that all the initiatives that were initiated in this aspect by our Hungarian friends will be continued also during the incoming Polish presidency as one of its priorities is “Europe taking advantage of openness”. I think that here the Polish and Hungarian idea is very similar, although expressed a little bit differently.

Today, multiculturalism, tolerance, intercultural dialogue are the necessity, not the option. We cannot lose anyone on the way, we have to create efficient mechanism for integration of those who feel disadvantaged and excluded from Europe of today. Europe must improve its capacity to integrate those who come to our shores and

those who are here but do not take the full opportunity due to low growth and lack of jobs.

Also in this respect for the first priority of the Polish presidency, which is to ensure the conditions for better growth, the Danube Strategy is a key mechanism to achieve this goal.

Thus, on this special occasion of the first General Assembly of Danube Civil Society Forum, I would like to call all of you to participate, in your own way, in making Danube region the best example of Europe we want to see in decades to come.

Thank you for your kind attention.