



Prof. Danuta Hübner

Chair of the Committee on Regional Development

"Danube Area - Potential for the young generation"

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It is a great pleasure for me to participate in this third Danube Conference. I remember the enthusiasm of our first meeting in this room back in 2008 and our first discussion in Ulm, still in my capacity as Commissioner and I am happy to see the progress that has been made so far. I trust that implementation of this program will allow you all, natives and friends of this region to be more effective in better exploiting the shared opportunities that Danube region offers and finding solutions to shared problems.

In the European Parliament's resolution, adopted earlier this year, we stressed the need to involve regional and local stakeholders in the Danube region through the whole process of the strategy. We emphasized the need of a 'governance structure' for the strategy that would consolidate regional and local dimension of the strategy and ensure active involvement of cities and regions, as well as all partners: academic community, business world and civil society.

The European Commission closed the consultation process and presented the first ideas of the Action Plan on 8/9 June 2010 during a conference held in Constanta (RO). The process of preparing the Strategy organised by the European Commission showed a strong involvement of all parties concerned and a huge support to the first ideas. The draft Action Plan has already been discussed through bilateral meetings with each country of the Danube Region. The Commission will adopt the Action Plan in December, then the Strategy will be discussed by the other EU institutions. The Council is expected to endorse it during the Hungarian Presidency. Finally, the European Council should express its support.

I am deeply convinced about the rationale for this strategy. And I see two major arguments here. First, in the years to come there can be more new challenges, problems and opportunities that do not recognise administrative and political borders. As they are shared, they require shared solutions. Secondly, if we need shared solutions we must aim at a deeper territorial cooperation that could go beyond learning from each other - important as it is - and sharing experience, towards joint projects, effective coordination of actions, exploitation of synergies between policies and funding. If we look around - into the global context of European development - what comes out is that main trajectory towards a better future is cooperation. We need more cooperation in Europe, wise, well thought through, based on better use of our resources, on shared vision and shared responsibility.

This strategy does offers more and more profound cooperation. The strategy brings together not only stakeholders from different territories but also stakeholders from different policy areas, from different sectors. This mirrors the real life, the fact that the issues to tackle are interrelated and cannot be effectively addressed in an isolated manner through actions in single sectors or single regions or Member States.

In spite of the long tradition of cooperation in the Danube basin, there is clearly a need to deepen and expand the existing cooperation, and to create stronger links among existing institutions, among Member States, regions and

cities. I am sure we all want to see more cooperation for research and innovation, but also for transport, resource efficiency and building new skills.

Regions within countries – and also across borders – already work together on setting out the priorities for the Danube's regions and cities. Identification, preparation and implementation of projects that compose part of the strategy should be done together in a partnership including the private sector, business community, academia and non-governmental organisations. Their involvement in both, preparatory process and implementation of the strategy can result in seeking of ownership and responsibility.

I see great value of the strategy in the bottom-up nature of this process. I appreciate your commitment to the use of best practices. I would like to encourage you to be innovative in formulating your aspirations and effective in their realization. You, in this region, know very well the cost of wasted opportunities. I also appreciate your commitment to work together beyond EU borders.

A real need for the Danube Strategy has not come from Brussels; it is what we call a bottom-up initiative. This gives the strategy a good start but also makes the parties involved responsible.

At the time of the launching of the macro-regional approach to regional development, the intention was to replace some time in the future the transnational strand of European territorial cooperation with a macro-regional one based on a bottom-up approach and a much deeper cooperation. I hope we will be able to incorporate both Baltic and Danube strategies into the European Territorial Cooperation. The real challenge is, however, how to use the strategy framework to coordinate across all European policies and programs active in the region.

The process of drawing up the Danube Strategy has triggered a very intense dialogue among numerous partners in this area. This aspiration to do concrete project and to have a genuine cooperation, which to me was a prime

example of partnership, helped a lot in drawing up a truly action-oriented comprehensive Strategy. A Strategy that can catalyse actions that can replace the often too fragmented policy responses and can contribute substantially to deepening regional integration, strengthened cohesion and better use of available resources.

In the Danube basin there is more than 100 bln euro for regional development, many projects are already underway. European regional policy provides a programming framework and substantial part of financial resources for projects in the area. Regions and cities have been particularly active in building good partnerships through many European projects, in particular funded by the ERDF through the CADSES transnational co-operation programme.

For the period 2007-2013, nearly half of the Territorial Cooperation Programs are focused on the Danube area. More exactly, on a total of 94 ETC programs, 41 ETC programs (18 Cross-border programs, 7 Transnational programs, 13 IPA CBC programs and 3 ENPI programs) are being run in the Danube region.

A macro-regional framework of action calls for greater synergies between policies and means, in particular those related to the European Neighbourhood Policy and, within this, the programmes under the Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC), thus linking both regional and international instruments.

A macro-regional strategy offers a framework for deeper cooperation and a better link between the territorial cooperation objective and core programs. But this process goes well beyond the programmes, projects and funding provided by the cohesion policy. All European policies are doing their job here along the Danube. This strategy is also a test of our capacity to better coordinate all those facilities and actions and to better use the synergies that cooperation can deliver.

The European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) may be a useful tool to reinforce territorial cooperation in the Danube area. The EGTCs are cooperation structures set up with the aim of facilitating and promoting cooperation at cross-border, trans-national and interregional level; macro-regions are enhanced forms of cooperation along those lines, and could be seen as a way of stepping up those coordination and implementation frameworks in a newer approach to multilevel governance; this approach could be followed in the foreseen review of that regulation in 2011.

Let me conclude by putting emphasis on the value added of the process of joint work on the strategy and on the open nature of this process. The emerging challenges, the changing world, growing aspirations of citizens and progress in implementing the strategy will require a permanent updating of the strategy to keep pace with our ambitions. The Strategy has made you all enter the path of a long term cooperation. And this is a good news.

Thank you for your attention.