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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

European Union Strategy for Danube Region

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European Union Strategy for Danube Region

1. INTRODUCTION

The Danube Region has changed dramatically. Most recently, there have been the 2004 and 2007 waves of EU enlargement. The world's most international river basin is now largely a European Union (EU) space. There are new opportunities to address its challenges and potential, especially to reinforce its efforts to overcome the economic crisis in a sustainable manner. Socio-economic development, competitiveness, environmental management and resource efficient growth can be improved, security and transport corridors modernised. The Danube can open the EU to its near neighbours, the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. An EU Strategy for the Danube Region can contribute to EU objectives, reinforcing major EU policy initiatives, especially the Europe 2020 strategy.

The Danube Region is a functional area defined by its river basin. Cooperation bodies such as the Danube Commission and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River address specific issues. The Strategy widens this approach to tackle priorities in an integrated way. Geographically it concerns primarily but not exclusively: Germany (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), Austria, the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria within the EU, and Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (the regions along the Danube) outside. The Strategy remains open to other partners in the Region. Since the Danube flows into the Black Sea, it should be coherent with Black Sea perspectives. With over 100 million people, and a fifth of EU surface, the area is vital for Europe.

In the Region, there is a need to connect people, their ideas and needs. Transport interconnections must be modernised, and informatics access improved. Energy can be cheaper and more secure, thanks to better links and alternative sources. Development can be balanced with protection of the environment, within a sustainable development approach, in line with the environmental *acquis communautaire* as applicable. Work together is needed to minimise risks and disasters such as floods, droughts and industrial accidents. By building on considerable research and innovation perspectives, the Region can be at the forefront of EU trade and enterprise. Disparities in education and employment can be overcome. It can be made a safe and secure area, where conflict, marginalisation and crime are properly addressed.

By 2020, all citizens of the Region should enjoy better prospects of higher education, employment and prosperity in their own home area. The Strategy should make this a truly 21st century region, secure and confident, and one of the most attractive in Europe.

To achieve this, the European Council requested the Commission to prepare this Strategy¹. It follows the welcome for the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, now being implemented. The Danube request, based on the Baltic experience, underlines an integrated approach to sustainable development. Synergies and trade-offs must be identified, e.g. developing cutting-

¹ The European Council formally asked the European Commission to coordinate an EU Strategy for the Danube Region, stating in its conclusions of 19 June 2009: "It (...) invites the Commission to present an EU strategy for the Danube region before the end of 2010".

edge green technology, working towards better alignment of policies and funding to improve impact on the ground, and overcoming fragmentation. The Commission, operating across many policy domains, can facilitate such an approach, as outlined in: (1) this Communication to the other EU Institutions, and (2) an accompanying Action Plan.

The Commission strongly believes that setting targets is essential, to focus and prioritise efforts. These should be further developed with stakeholders, immediately following adoption of this Communication and finalised before the European Council in June 2011. Targets will apply to Member States; non Member States will be encouraged to strive towards them in the light of their specific circumstances. The targets will be monitored closely in the context of Commission reporting.

2. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The proposals follow extensive consultation of stakeholders. Governments, including those from non Member States, have been involved through ‘National Contact Points’. The expertise of relevant Commission services and the European Investment Bank, and other regional bodies (e.g. the Regional Cooperation Council) has been mobilised. Stakeholders were consulted on-line, and via five major conferences. The main messages were: (1) this is a welcome initiative to reinforce the integration of the Region in the EU; (2) Member States and Third Countries (including candidate countries and potential candidates) commit themselves at the highest political level; (3) the Commission is key in facilitating the process; (4) existing resources can be much better used for Strategy objectives and (5) the Strategy must deliver visible, concrete improvements for the Region and its people.

2.1. Challenges

Historically, the Danube Region has been particularly affected by turbulent events, with many conflicts, movements of population and undemocratic regimes. However, the fall of the Iron Curtain and EU enlargement provide an opportunity for a better future. This means addressing major challenges, in particular:

- **Mobility:** the Danube River itself is a major TEN-T Corridor. However, it is used way below its full capacity. Freight transported on the Danube is only 10%-20% of that on the Rhine. As inland waterway transport has important environmental and efficiency benefits, its potential must be sustainably exploited. There is particular need for greater multi-modality, better interconnection with other river basins modernising and extending infrastructure in transport nodes such as inland ports.
- **Energy:** prices are high in the Region, in relative terms. Fragmented markets lead to higher costs and reduced competition. Reliance on too few external suppliers increases vulnerability, as periodic winter crises testify. A greater diversity of supply through interconnections and genuine regional markets will increase energy security. Improved efficiency, including energy saving and more renewable sources, is crucial.
- **Environment:** the Danube Region is a major international hydrological basin and ecological corridor. This requires a regional approach to nature conservation, spatial planning and water management. Pollution does not respect national borders. Major problems such as untreated sewage and fertiliser and soil run-off make the Danube highly polluted. The environmental impact of transport links, tourist developments, or new energy-producing facilities must also be considered.
- **Risks:** major flooding, droughts, and industrial pollution events are all too frequent. Prevention, preparedness and effective reaction require a high degree of cooperation and information sharing.

- **Socio-economic:** the Region has very wide disparities. It has some of the most successful but also the poorest regions in the EU. In particular, contacts and cooperation are often lacking, both financially and institutionally. Enterprises do not sufficiently exploit the international dimension of marketing, innovation or research. The share of highly educated people in the Danube Region is lower than the EU27 average, again with a pronounced divide. The best often leave.
- **Security, serious and organised crime:** significant problems persist. Trafficking in human beings and smuggling of goods are particular problems in several countries. Corruption undermines public confidence and hampers development.

These challenges are best addressed together, identifying priorities, agreeing and implementing actions. For example, developers and conservationists must find innovative solutions, resolving together the most difficult issues for the benefit of the whole region.

2.2. Opportunities

The Danube Region also has many opportunities. It has many areas of outstanding natural beauty. It has a rich history, heritage and culture. There is immense development potential, especially in the countries most affected by the transitions since 1989. There are creative ideas, and a quality labour force. For example, the Region:

- is where Europe opens to the east. Existing **transport and trade links** must be developed (e.g. through the TRACECA transport network connecting the EU through the Black Sea region to the Caucasus and Central Asia);
- has a **solid education system**, with many universities. However, quality is variable. Education and training must be relevant to labour market needs, while student mobility within the Region is promoted;
- possesses a **striking cultural, ethnic and natural diversity**. There are global cities and heritage sites, including more capitals than any river in the world. This requires a modern tourism offer and infrastructure, so that guest and host can profit;
- can better exploit **renewable energy sources**, whether water, biomass wind or thermal. There is also great scope for **energy efficiency**, by better managing energy demand, and by modernising buildings and logistics. These actions would foster the transition to a low-carbon economy;
- is characterised by **rich environmental assets**: exceptional fauna and flora, precious water resources and outstanding landscapes (e.g. the Danube Delta, the Carpathians). These should be sustainably preserved and restored.

Making the most of these opportunities also requires increased cooperation, planning and investing together, and developing the crucial links.

3. RESPONSE: AN ACTION PLAN

An integrated response is therefore at the heart of the proposed Strategy. This emphasises: better and more intelligent connections for mobility, trade and energy; action on environment and risk management; cooperation on security. There is benefit from common work on innovation, tourism, information society, institutional capacity and marginalised communities.

The Strategy proposes an Action Plan, to which a strong commitment from the countries and stakeholders is needed. The Commission will regularly review progress. As a result, actions and projects will be updated or replaced as they are completed, making it a ‘rolling’ Plan. There is an emphasis on an integrated place-based approach. Good links between urban and

rural areas, fair access to infrastructures and services, and comparable living conditions will promote territorial cohesion, now an explicit EU objective.

The consultation identified many proposals for action. The Commission, in partnership with Member States, regions and other stakeholders has selected those which:

- Demonstrate immediate and visible benefits for the people of the Region;
- Have an impact on the macro-region (or a significant part of it). Projects should therefore promote sustainable development and cover several regions and countries;
- Are coherent and mutually supportive, creating win-win solutions;
- Are realistic (technically feasible and with credible funding).

The projects presented are examples to be promoted. They serve to illustrate, not to prioritise. Many others have been proposed – the Action Plan is an indicative framework, evolving as the work progresses.

Four Pillars address the major issues. Each comprises Priority Areas, distinct fields of action. These are:

(1) *Connecting the Danube Region*

- To improve mobility and multimodality
 - (a) Inland Waterways
 - (b) Road, rail and air links
- To encourage more sustainable energy
- To promote culture and tourism, people to people contacts

(2) *Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region*

- To restore and maintain the quality of waters
- To manage environmental risks
- To preserve biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils

(3) *Building Prosperity in the Danube Region*

- To develop the knowledge society through research, education and information technologies
- To support the competitiveness of enterprises, including cluster development
- To invest in people and skills

(4) *Strengthening the Danube Region*

- To step up institutional capacity and cooperation
- To work together to promote security and tackle organised and serious crime

3.1. Connecting the Danube Region

Good connections are key for the Danube Region, either internally or to other European and global regions. No part should remain peripheral. Transport and energy infrastructures have many gaps and deficiencies, due to insufficient capacity, quality or poor maintenance. Better connections among people are also needed, especially through culture and tourism.

Effective improvements need coordinated planning, funding and implementation. Market failures, due to externalities, are strikingly evident in lack of investments across borders.

Large projects need to be identified and implemented sustainably and efficiently, with shared costs and benefits. The more users, the more efficient investments become, with significant economies of scale.

Main issues

Transport

The river basin has much potential for sustainable inland navigation, and the river is central. This needs improvements in management, equipment and availability of qualified staff. The physical capacity of the Danube and its tributaries should be improved, and existing bottlenecks removed, to ensure the proper level of navigability, implementing the NAIADES programme and respecting environmental legislation, and based on the "Joint Statement on Inland Navigation and Environmental Sustainability in the Danube River Basin". Innovative technologies should be supported, in line with market needs. Better training and career opportunities should overcome a shortage of younger personnel (boat men, captains, etc.).

Road, rail and air infrastructure is often inefficient or simply missing, especially cross-border connections. Implementation of TEN-T priority projects and the Rail Freight Corridors according to Regulation (EC) No 913/2010 must be on time. The future Transport Community Treaty provides for better integration of the Western Balkans Region. Multimodality and interoperability, exploiting the potential of the river as a core element in modern logistics, are crucial. North-south connections are also needed. The Danube Functional Airspace Block (FAB) is essential for flights management as well as enhancement of regional airports capacities.

Energy

Periodic crises highlight the Region's vulnerability. The quality of infrastructure, security of supply, market organisation, unsustainable demand, energy efficiency, and use of renewables are often problematic. Modernising and extending energy networks, especially in terms of interconnectors, by implementing the European Energy Programme for Recovery and by reinforcing the TEN-E network is essential. There needs to be exchange of experience especially for smart grids, smart cities and eco-innovation.

Culture and Tourism

With common history and tradition, culture and arts reflecting the diverse communities of the Region, as well as its outstanding natural heritage, the Region has attractive assets. The Danube Delta is a world heritage site offering sporting and other recreational options. A common and sustainable approach to improving and publicising these opportunities should make the Danube Region a European and world "brand".

Targets as examples could be:

- Increase the cargo transport on the river by 20% by 2020 compared to 2010;
- Remove existing navigability bottlenecks on the river so as to accommodate type VIb vessels all year round by 2015²;
- Improved travel times for competitive railway passenger connections between major cities;

² The international classification of European Inland Waterways (UNECE/TRANS/120/Rev.4, p. 28/29) in the European Agreement on Main Inland Waterways of International Importance (AGN) classifies the parameters for motor vessels and pushed convoys. In the present text, category VIb uniquely refers to pushed convoys and inland waterways vessels with a draught of up to 2.5m.

- Implementation of the 4 Rail Freight Corridors crossing the Danube Region as planned within 3 or 5 years;
- Development of efficient multimodal terminals at Danube river ports to connect inland waterways with rail and road transport by 2020;
- Achievement of national targets based on the Europe 2020 climate and energy targets;

3.2. Protecting the environment in the Danube Region

Environmental resources are shared across borders and go beyond national interests. This is particularly true of the Danube Region, which includes mountainous areas such as the Carpathians, the Balkans and part of the Alps. It also has a rich and unique flora and fauna, aquatic and terrestrial, including the few places in Europe home to pelicans, wolves, bears and lynx. These are under growing pressure from human activity. Cooperation is crucial, otherwise good work in one place is quickly undone by neglect elsewhere. Existing cooperation structures should be reinforced.

Main issues

Water

The Region is the most international river basin in the world, with many crucial tributaries, lakes and ground water bodies. Ensuring good water quality, as required by the Water Framework Directive, is central. Sustainable water management is needed, jointly reducing pollution from organic, nutrient or hazardous substances. The River Basin Management Plan adopted by all Danube States in 2009 sets concrete targets and measures upon which to build.

Risks

Inhabitants of the Region must be protected from disastrous events, such as floods and industrial accidents which have significant transnational negative impacts – most recently endured in 2010 – by preventive and disaster management measures implemented jointly, for example as required by the Floods, Seveso, Mining Waste or Environmental Liability Directives. Work undertaken in isolation simply displaces the problem and puts neighbouring regions in difficulty. Increasing frequency of droughts is also an issue, as is adaptation to climate change. Regional cooperation must facilitate Green Infrastructure, application of long-term, ecosystem-based solutions, and learning from previous events.

Biodiversity, Soils

Loss of natural habitats puts pressure on fauna and flora, and affects the overall quality of environmental health. Fragmentation of ecosystems, land use intensification and urban sprawl are major pressures. The 2020 EU target for biodiversity³ must be met, by halting biodiversity and ecosystems loss, and by restoring ecosystem services and reconnecting habitats. The objectives of nature protection areas, such as Natura 2000 sites, can be achieved only with due respect to the ecological requirements of the whole region. Regarding soils, erosion from arable lands causes water pollution, along with contaminated sites and waste disposal, all addressed by concrete actions in the Strategy.

Targets as examples could be:

- Achieve the environmental targets set out in the Danube River Basin Management Plan;

³ Environment Council Conclusions (15 March 2010): “To halt the loss of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystem services in the EU by 2020, restore them in so far as feasible, while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss”.

- Reduce the nutrient levels in the Danube River to allow the recovery of the Black Sea ecosystems to conditions similar to 1960;
- Complete and adopt the Delta management Plan by 2013;
- Implement Danube wide flood risk management plans - due in 2015 under the Floods Directive – to include significant reduction of flood risk by 2021, also taking into account potential impacts of climate change;
- Draw up effective management plans for all Natura 2000 sites;
- Secure viable populations of Danube sturgeon species and other indigenous fish species by 2020, combating invasive species;
- Reduce by 25% the area affected by soil erosion exceeding 10 tonnes per hectare by 2020.

3.3. Building prosperity in the Danube Region

The Region encompasses the extremes of the EU in economic and social terms. From its most competitive to its poorest regions, from the most highly skilled to the least educated, and from the highest to the lowest standard of living, the differences are striking. The Strategy reinforces Europe 2020, offering the opportunity to match the capital-rich with the labour-rich, and the technologically-advanced with the waiting markets, in particular through expanding the knowledge society and with a determined approach to inclusion. Marginalised communities (especially Roma, the majority of whom live in the Region) in particular should benefit.

Main issues

Education & skills

Investment in people is needed so that the Region can sustainably progress and grow, prioritising knowledge and inclusion. Building on the success of parts of the Region will open access to further education, and modernise training and social support.

Research & Innovation

Targeted support for research infrastructure will stimulate excellence and deepen networking between knowledge providers, companies and policy-makers. The region must use national and regional funds better, and benefit fully from the European Research Area. Existing bilateral agreements should lead to multilateral coordination. Developing regions downstream can benefit from the leading - indeed world-class - innovative regions upstream.

Enterprises

Top-performing regions in Europe can be found in the area. Others lag a long way behind. They need to benefit, through better connections between innovation and business supporting institutions. Clusters and links between centres of excellence, binding them into existing education and research networks, will extend the competitiveness of upstream enterprises to the whole region.

Employment market

Higher levels of employment are crucial. People need opportunities close to where they live. They also need mobility. The Region needs to offer a future to the brightest and most enterprising, through stronger cooperation regarding policies, measures and information exchange.

Marginalised communities

One third of EU's population at risk of poverty, many from marginalised groups, live in the area. Roma communities, 80% of whom live in the Region, suffer especially from social and economic exclusion, spatial segregation and sub-standard living conditions. Efforts to escape these have EU-wide effects, but the causes must be addressed first in the Region.

Targets as examples could be:

- To invest 3% of GDP in Research and Development by 2020;
- Broadband access for all EU citizens in the Region by 2013;
- Increase the number of patents obtained in the Region by 50%;
- Increase the share of the EU population aged 30-34 with tertiary or equivalent education to 40% by 2020.

3.4. Strengthening the Danube Region

The dramatic changes since 1989 transformed society. Particular attention is needed, since the Danube Region includes Member States, which have joined at different moments, as well as countries applying for EU membership, and other third countries. Most face similar problems, but with different resources available. Effective responses to the common challenges of security and the fight against serious and organised crime require coordination at all levels. Exchange of good administrative practice is important to make the Region safer and more secure, and to reinforce its integration into the EU.

Main issues

Institutional capacity and cooperation

Structures and capacity for private and public sector decision-making need to improve, including good planning and international cooperation, and supported by the macro-regional approach. The optimal use of resources is essential.

Security

Corruption, organised and serious crime is of increasing concern. Issues such as smuggling of goods, trafficking in human beings, and cross border black markets require strengthening the rule of law, both within and across jurisdictions. Intelligence must be better shared, effective joint actions mounted.

Targets as examples could be:

- Establishing benchmarks for e-government and reducing excessive bureaucracy by 2012;
- Maximum 4 weeks for business start-up permissions by 2015;
- Efficient exchange of information between relevant law enforcement actors by 2015 with the aim of improving security and tackling serious and organised crime in the 14 countries;
- Effective co-operation between relevant law enforcement actors by 2015.

4. IMPLEMENTATION AND GOVERNANCE

To address these issues, we need a good base to work together.

• A sustainable framework for cooperation

The Strategy seeks to make best use of what is available, by aligning efforts, specifically policies and funding. Actions are complementary. All stakeholders must take responsibility.

In this respect, the Declaration of the Bucharest Summit on Danube⁴ is an important commitment. The Commission can help by facilitating and supporting action, but the commitment and practical involvement of all authorities, at national, regional and other levels is needed. Working together with international and cross-border organisations across the Region will encourage synergies and avoid duplication. A reinforced territorial dimension will provide an integrated approach, and encourage better coordination of sectoral policies. There must be an absolute focus on results.

- **Coordination**

Several measures are needed.

Policy-level coordination will be the responsibility of the Commission, assisted by a High Level Group of all Member States. Non Member States should be invited to the Group as appropriate.

The Commission would consult the Group on modifications to Strategy and Action Plan, reports and on monitoring. The Group addresses policy orientation and prioritisation.

The coordination of each Priority Area is the task of Member States (together with non Member States or regions, except for topics which the EU addresses at State level, such as security, serious and organised crime), in consultation with the Commission, and relevant EU agencies and regional bodies. 'Priority Area Coordinators', who can demonstrate Danube-wide commitment, acceptance and expertise, ensure implementation (e.g. by agreeing on planning, with targets, indicators and timetables, and by ensuring wide contacts between project promoters, programmes and funding sources, providing technical assistance and advice). This work will be trans-national, inter-sectoral and inter-institutional.

The facilitation role of the Commission is assisted by National Contact Points. These ensure co-ordination in each country, identify the relevant contacts, and above all advance practical aspects of the work.

- **Implementation**

Implementation of actions is the responsibility of all, at country, regional, urban and local level. Actions (which state the objective to be reached) must be transformed into concrete projects (which are detailed and require a project leader, a timeframe and financing). These should, while respecting the autonomy of programme decision-making, be actively facilitated in submitting proposals.

- **Funding**

The Strategy is implemented by mobilising and aligning existing funding to its objectives, where appropriate and in line with overall frameworks. Indeed, much is already available via numerous EU programmes (e.g. EUR 100 billion from Structural Funds 2007-2013, as well as significant IPA and ENPI funds). Project selection procedures could be reviewed to support the agreed aims. There are also other means, such as the Western Balkan Investment Framework as well as the international financing institutions (e.g. EIB: EUR 30 billion 2007-2009, with its support to navigability and depollution). Attention should be given to combining grants and loans. There are national, regional and local resources. Indeed, accessing and combining funding, especially from public and private sources below the EU-level, is crucial.

- **Reporting and evaluation**

⁴ Bucharest, 8 November 2010.

Reporting and evaluation is done by the Commission, in partnership with the Priority Area Coordinators and other stakeholders. Coordinators will identify progress related to the improvements that actions and projects will deliver and to achievement of targets, as well as provide information regularly on their work. Based on this, the Commission drafts reports, indicating progress of the Action Plan.

The Commission also organises an Annual Forum, to discuss the work, to consult on revised actions, and to develop new approaches. Countries, the EU institutions, and the stakeholders (especially inter-governmental bodies, the private sector and civil society) participate.

- **No new EU funds, no new EU legislation, no new EU Structures**

The Commission prepares the Strategy on the understanding this implies no special treatment, in budget or legal terms, for the Region. Specifically:

- (1) The Strategy provides no new EU funds. There could be additional international, national, regional or private funds, although better use of existing funds is emphasised;
- (2) The Strategy requires no changes to EU legislation, since the EU legislates for the EU27 and not for a macro-region alone. If agreed, there could be changes at national or other levels, to address specific objectives;
- (3) The Strategy creates no additional structures. The implementation is through existing bodies, whose complementarity must be maximised. No overall impact is envisaged on Commission resources.

5. LINKS WITH EU POLICIES

To reinforce the integration of the whole Region, the Strategy aims to strengthen EU policies and legislation implementation in the area. It provides political support to current initiatives and raises their visibility. In particular, some actions decided in the framework of existing bodies are part of the Action Plan. In addition,

- Europe 2020 is the key EU commitment to jobs and smart, sustainable, inclusive growth, which the Strategy will consolidate. It has five headline targets. These are: promoting employment; improving the conditions for innovation, research and development; meeting climate change and energy objectives; improving education levels; and promoting social inclusion in particular through the reduction of poverty, and addressing the challenges of ageing. The Strategy, with its vision for the Danube Region in 2020, reinforces this. It supports sustainable growth, aiming to reduce energy consumption, increase the use of renewable energies, modernise the transport sector by making it more environmentally friendly and more efficient, and to promote ‘green’ tourism. It helps remove internal market bottlenecks and improves the business environment.
- Consistency with EU legislation and policies is at the core of the Strategy. It addresses implementation gaps, and practical or organisational difficulties leading to lack of results. It supports better implementation of EU legal obligations, especially in relation to the Single Market and the environment. It also contributes to policies such as transport (TEN-T currently under revision, as well as the future transport policy for countries), energy (TEN-E) networks, the strategy for the Single Market (Single Market Act) and the Digital Agenda. The EU post-2010 biodiversity target and strategy, with its 2050 vision and a 2020 target, is also reinforced. As the gateway to neighbours in Europe and onwards to Asia, the Region is crucial in supporting other EU external policies, in line with the European Neighbourhood Policy and its regional initiatives (e.g. the Eastern Partnership).

6. CONCLUSION

The Strategy provides a sustainable framework for policy integration and coherent development of the Danube Region. It sets out priority actions to make it an EU region for the 21st century. It must be accompanied by sufficient information and publicity to ensure its objectives are widely known.

The Commission therefore invites the Council to examine and endorse this Communication and the related Action Plan.