

Speech: Towards a Strategy for the Danube Region

Dear Ministers,
Ambassadors,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Friends,

It is just 7 months since some of us met in Brussels, during the 2008 Open Days to launch the idea of a European Strategy for the Danube.

At the time, I was struck by how appropriate the title of your conference was: "The Danube - River of the European Future". This was actually a strong political statement which we all wholeheartedly supported and the progress made in the intervening months has simply confirmed the truth of this title.

The Need for Co-operation

It is true today to say that if we want to make the most of the opportunities the River Danube offers and if we want at the same time to ensure more socio-economic cohesion throughout the Danube Basin, we have to act together and work in close partnership to face the challenges that exist in the area, be they transport, environment, economy or cultural.

This is already being done at present – in addition to your bilateral relations, the EU's regional policy provides a programming framework and is financing for real and concrete projects across the Danube

Basin. But compared to what we want to achieve, this could be perceived as being a somewhat piecemeal approach at present – the European Commission negotiates national or regional programmes along the Danube, each being implemented individually, in a single country or a single region.

Paradoxically, where we do currently have the opportunity to work jointly – for example, in the Central Europe and South-East Europe transnational programmes – the financial resources available are relatively limited. Through these programmes, we can support studies, basic research, exchange of good practices. This is all extremely important – but it is not enough if we want to make a fundamental, long-term difference.

I am convinced that the solution is a comprehensive Danube Strategy, as we discussed in Brussels last October and which many of you have been working on enthusiastically since then.

This preparatory work is being done at a particularly interesting moment for such macro-region co-operation and I believe that we have a real opportunity to ensure that the Danube region is at the forefront of this process. A number of elements which are coming together at the same time are raising the profile of the Danube region concept and I would like to speak about these now. There are 3 such elements which speak in favour of the strategic approach and facilitate the preparation of a Danube Strategy.

The Baltic Sea Example

Firstly, there is the evident precedent of the European Union's Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. Many of you are already acquainted with this. When the Commission was asked by the European Council to take the lead in preparing a European Baltic Sea Strategy in December 2007, this was the first time such an approach had been taken in the EU.

Over the last 18 months, a comprehensive consultation, discussion, and analysis process has been carried out across the Baltic Sea Region. This is leading up to the adoption by the Commission next month of a Communication on the Baltic Sea Strategy, which will be accompanied by a detailed Action Plan setting out around 100 actions and flagship projects for delivering the Baltic Sea Strategy.

We can already see many positive lessons we can draw from the development work on the Baltic Sea Strategy, which will be relevant for the preparation of the Danube strategy. I would particularly underline here the importance of partnership. The strong horizontal involvement (that is, actors from different countries, different sectors and different institutions) and strong vertical involvement (actors from international, national, regional and local levels) has ensured a very broad range of participants, far beyond the traditional actors involved in transnational co-operation, for example. Furthermore, this is not just a question of formal involvement – all participants have been genuinely and actively involved.

A further aspect I would like to emphasise is that of visibility. The process of creating the Baltic Sea Strategy has resulted in an increased awareness of the importance of transnational co-operation and of working together in the wider context. Moreover, this visibility has extended beyond the Baltic Sea Region itself to other parts of Europe, and this is one reason why it is important that the idea of the Danube Strategy moves forward rapidly today and remains at the forefront of this macro-region process.

It is clear that the value of the actual process of preparing the strategy has been enormous. It is not merely the final documents themselves which will bring benefits, but the process has generated additional potential for growth, for more research and for the economy as a whole.

A final key aspect I would like to highlight is that of the content of the Baltic Sea Strategy itself. The content is organised under four objectives – the environment, prosperity, connections, and security. This approach enables all participants to have ownership of the Strategy and it avoids "compartmentalising" the topics, thus allowing for a truly integrated approach.

Territorial Cohesion

The second element I would like to underline is the concept of territorial cohesion which has become more visible and more important for European integration in recent months. Working with you on the consultation exercise following the Commission's Green Paper on the subject last year, we have had a wide-ranging discussion with

all interested parties on the subject. The fact that we received more than 380 comprehensive written contributions from all types of stakeholders highlights the level of interest that exists in the topic. The Danube Strategy can be richer as a result.

Territorial cohesion is of particular importance for the debate on macro-regions for two reasons. Firstly, it is closely linked to the territorial co-operation objective which is going through a qualitative change of approach towards shared solutions for shared problems. Secondly, the concepts of harmonious and balanced territorial development and polycentric development – so important in the territorial cohesion discussion – lead us to integral elements of macro-region co-operation. Indeed, we have seen many projects supported through the transnational co-operation programmes, but what has perhaps been missing so far is an over-arching concept or process which provides a relevant, co-ordinated and integrated framework for these projects. By linking the concept of territorial cohesion to the development of macro-region strategies, we are providing just such a framework and we can make co-operation actions not only more strategic but also more thematically-focused.

Future Cohesion Policy

The third element that I see as being important for planning a Danube Strategy is the on-going discussion on the future of the EU's Cohesion Policy. While we are still in the discussion stage, we are making progress and we can already see the importance of the territorial dimension of Cohesion Policy.

Cohesion Policy has the capacity to act as a catalyst in mobilising actors and investments across regions and the whole European Union – and indeed beyond, as we have seen from the enthusiastic participation of neighbouring non-Member States in programmes like “South-East Europe”. This dimension is extremely important in the Danube context.

What we are seeing emerging from the debate, and as regional policy Ministers confirmed in their meeting in the Czech Republic last week, is that Cohesion Policy must remain a policy for all regions – issues such as climate change and globalisation require an integrated approach to ensure effectiveness.

Next Steps

The next steps towards a Danube Strategy are planned to happen rapidly. We are all here round the table today, but we have to move forward.

The Commission awaits the invitation from the European Council to undertake the preparation of the Strategy. We need a mandate in order to take this work forward, and here again the Baltic Sea approach offers a good example. This is not just a formality, however. One of the key lessons we have learned from our work on the Baltic Sea Strategy is the need for strong, unequivocal support at the political level as this opens doors and minds and makes people work together enthusiastically and efficiently. This provides the Commission with the necessary political capital to proceed.

Of course, even if we are awaiting the formal invitation, the Commission has not been idle. My staff are already participating more actively in Danube-related events across the region, including meetings of the Danube Commission, the International Committee for the Protection of the Danube River and the Danube Co-operation Process. I have also already had long discussions with Ms Peijs, the European Coordinator for Inland Waterways. The partnership dimension that I referred to earlier must begin as early in the process as possible if it is to be successful. We are already taking part in these meetings and making these contacts so that we are ready to start immediately.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For us Europeans, the Danube – our Common River – has always been one of the most celebrated symbols of Europe, linking as it does so many countries, regions and cities together on its journey to the sea. By preparing a Danube Strategy together, we can make use of that symbolism and help to deliver genuine benefits and improvements in the quality of life of all those European citizens living along this great river.

Thank you very much.