

II. Speech: “Commission Expectations from the Danube Strategy”

Ministers,
Ambassadors,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

I am very pleased to be here with you today, and I would very much like to thank our hosts for the invitation. The timing of your event is excellent, since it is barely one week since the European Commission was asked by the European Council to prepare a European Union Strategy for the Danube region. We have been asked to present the Strategy by the end of 2010. This timeline would then allow the Hungarian Presidency in the first half of 2011 to take forward the approval and implementation of the Strategy.

This process has happened extremely quickly. It is, after all, only nine months since the idea of a more strategic approach to co-operation in the Danube region was first discussed. It is important that we maintain this momentum and make rapid progress with the preparation of the Strategy.

First Steps

I should stress that we are not starting from zero. There is already much collaborative work on which we can build.

Indeed, even while waiting for a formal invitation from the Council, the Commission has been active. My collaborators in DG Regional Policy

have already been participating in Danube-related events across the region, including meetings of the Danube Commission and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River. This has allowed them to build up contacts across the region and to get a good overview of the state of play.

I myself participated in the Danube Summit in Ulm at the start of May where I encouraged participants to already start planning their input into the Strategy.

The Need for Co-operation

In addition to this initial, direct work that the Commission has undertaken, there is, of course, already much history of co-operation across the Danube region, demonstrated by the fact that we are meeting today in the context of the Working Community of the Danube Regions. In addition, we have the Danube Commission on transport issues, the ICPDR on the environment, and the political dimension of the Danube Co-operation Process, to name but three. In the example of the Danube Commission, formal co-operation stretches back over 60 years.

There is a need, nonetheless, to deepen and expand the existing co-operation, and to create stronger links among these bodies, as well as with Member States and regions.

This points us towards the need for a fully integrated approach, with a strong partnership process – in other words, a comprehensive Danube Strategy.

Lessons Learned from the Baltic

And we are fortunate that we have a model on which we can base ourselves. As you will all know, the Commission has recently concluded a similar process which will provide us with much assistance in the development of the Danube Strategy.

Over the last 18 months, a comprehensive consultation, discussion, and analytical process has been carried out across the Baltic Sea Region. This has led to the adoption by the Commission two weeks ago of a Communication on the Baltic Sea Region Strategy, which is accompanied by a detailed Action Plan setting out around 15 priority areas and 80 actions and flagship projects for delivering genuine results for the benefit of the region.

It is important to stress that the Danube region is, of course, different in many ways from the Baltic Sea Region. Geographically, it extends along a river, rather than being a sea basin. Politically, it has more non-Member States. And institutionally, from its history of co-operation, it has a different make-up than the Baltic Sea Region.

We are all aware of these differences – this simply underlines the point that each macro-region strategy has to be unique, in order to address the specific nature of the region in question.

Nevertheless, the strategy for the Baltic Sea Region provides many positive elements which we can draw on for our work on the Danube Strategy.

The next steps

In this context, I would therefore like to set out a few of my initial thoughts on some concrete, clearly defined steps that we should all be taking to move the preparation process forward.

Firstly, within the Commission itself: inside DG Regional Policy, there is already a small core group dealing with Danube issues in the Territorial Co-operation Unit, which has been working on the process for obtaining the European Council request.

We will quickly establish an interservice group to ensure all possible dimensions of the Strategy are given due attention from the start. Several policy areas, including transport, environment and enlargement are all active on Danube matters, and it will be important to rapidly link all the relevant services closely together.

Secondly, in the Danube countries themselves, the Commission expects to see key contact persons named at a high level, where this has not been done already. In the Baltic Sea process, most countries designated co-ordinators in the Prime Ministers' offices, thus providing the necessary political support to the process. This, I think, is an important lesson in the Danube context.

One of the first tasks for such national contacts will be to co-ordinate the initial national input to the Strategy's preparation. This will likely be done through a non-paper approach, linked to an initial launch meeting of the Danube countries and regions.

Thirdly, I would expect regions within countries – and also across borders – to work together to set out the priorities for the Danube's regions and cities.

These processes – at Commission, country and regional level – will facilitate the first information gathering phase that is required for a Strategy. This is the stocktaking exercise to identify what is currently being implemented and in what sectors.

By identifying the key issues for the various actors across the region, and by linking this to what is already taking place, we will generate the initial outline of the strategy. The process will narrow down the critical overarching priorities for the Danube region, and will provide us with a first look at the broader topics that could be highlighted by the Strategy.

The development of this state of play process will then lead into a comprehensive consultation exercise across the region, covering national, regional and local authorities, the private sector, academia and non-governmental organisations. This mirrors the approach that we have taken in the Baltic Sea.

It will be important to link the consultation process to a strong publicity and communication exercise. This is why I foresee the holding of a series of large consultation events and round tables across the region in order to collect the views – and to obtain the commitment – of as many actors as possible.

Partnership

This emphasis on consultation and communication underlines the importance of adopting a broad, inclusive approach, involving all relevant actors and interested parties in the process. It is paramount that we take the time to listen to all those who wish to express their thoughts and priorities for future Danube developments. I must stress that this partnership dimension has already provided a tremendous amount of added value in the Baltic Sea context, even before the start of implementation.

Key Issues

Based on the work that we know is on-going, we can already look at some of the issues that the Strategy must address. I would like to identify three of these now.

Firstly, it is clear that transport will be one of the key priorities. The Danube River is both Pan-European Transport Corridor VII and part of Priority Project 18 of the Trans-European Transport Network – the Waterway axis Rhine/Meuse-Main-Danube. There is huge potential for increasing the amount of freight being moved on Europe's inland waterways, but this will require planned, co-ordinated work along the length of the Danube.

To give you just one example of the challenges we face: my collaborators in DG Regional Policy are currently working closely with the Romanian and Bulgarian authorities on a joint project to improve navigation on their joint stretch of the Danube. Since there is not enough funding allocated to cross-border programmes, we have to try and co-

ordinate two national projects. To facilitate this, we are looking to use a European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation to pull the two parts of the project together. However, even once all this is organised correctly, and the project is implemented, and it has improved navigation on the Romania-Bulgaria stretch of the river – we will still need to see how it fits with navigation improvement projects elsewhere on the river.

Secondly, the environmental dimension will be equally important. Many of the Danube countries face regular, major flooding problems which are outside their control as the causes and solutions lie further upstream. Similarly, there is still too much pollution being pumped into the Danube which then drifts downstream and into the Black Sea. We also have to look at the tributary rivers, such as the Sava and the Tisza, as an overarching strategy must take them into account as well.

It is evident that one of the key issues in the preparation of the Strategy will be striking the appropriate balance between the transport and environmental aspects. Here, I am encouraged by the work already done in developing the Joint Statement on Guiding Principles for the Development of Inland Navigation and Environmental Protection in the Danube River Basin by the Danube Commission, the ICPDR and the Sava River Commission. At the same time, I would underline the need to move beyond “guiding principles” and to generate concrete projects.

The third element I would like to focus on is economic development along the Danube. Here, regions and cities have been particularly active in building good partnerships, through projects such as DonauHanse which was funded by the ERDF through the CADSES transnational co-

operation programme. There has been much discussion and planning in relation to economic development issues in these projects, but perhaps there has been insufficient delivery of concrete results on the ground.

Looking at these three topics, all of which will clearly feature highly in the final Strategy, I would stress two points: firstly there is a need for more genuine projects delivering real results for the citizens living along the Danube. And secondly, where there are projects already being implemented, we need to look closely at improving co-ordination among the projects, in order to deliver better impact on the ground.

Future Cohesion Policy

Finally, I would like to add a few words at this point about the on-going debate on the future of the EU's Cohesion Policy. While this discussion is, of course, still at a relatively early stage, we have already much information and analysis available to us and we can already see the importance of the "place-based", territorial dimension.

Cohesion Policy has the capacity to act as a catalyst in mobilising actors across the whole European Union – and indeed beyond, as we have seen from the enthusiastic participation of neighbouring non-Member States in transnational co-operation programmes like “South-East Europe”.

Furthermore, Cohesion Policy has a clear focus on delivering integrated solutions to the challenges our Member States and regions are facing. This is only possible if Cohesion Policy remains a policy for all regions – without that all-encompassing approach, it will not be possible to draw in

all actors in a particular macro-region, and without that integrated approach, the macro-region dimension cannot function effectively.

In the coming reflections on the future of Cohesion Policy, I think that it will be important to consider how this macro-regional approach could be integrated into the wider policy. One obvious aspect is to look at the co-operation programmes and to see whether the macro-regional dimension offers a new method of developing such transnational co-operation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Danube is the common link for the many countries, regions and cities that it winds through on its journey to the sea. It has always been one of the most celebrated symbols of Europe. By preparing a Danube Strategy together, we can make use of that symbolism and help deliver genuine benefits and improvements in the quality of life of those European citizens living along this great river.

Thank you very much.