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EU Strategy for the Danube Region
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We meet in the middle of the ongoing discussion on the future of European regional policy, on the role that regions and cities should play in designing and implementing Europe 2020 strategy and the role and place of macro-regions in the future cohesion policy has become central to the debate on the future cohesion policy. The result of this debate depend also on our experience with the Danube strategy.

The decision-making process on the strategy has happened extremely quickly and it is important that we maintain this momentum and make rapid progress with the preparation of the Strategy.

This meeting is part of the process of building political capital to support the strategy. It also raises the awareness of Members of the European Parliament with regard to development challenges and opportunities of the Danube region. There is, of course, already much history of co-operation across the Danube region. There is 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. The challenge is to understand well why we need a strategy in spite of this history of cooperation. It is good to know what works and what does not.

There clearly is a need to deepen and expand the existing cooperation, and to create stronger links among existing institutions, among Member States, regions and cities.

We have the experience of the Baltic Sea strategy, which is also an inspiration for us here. 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, it has a different history of co-operation, it has a different make-up.

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. But there is a lot to learn, and for others who will follow there will be also a lot to learn from the Danube process.

It is a complex process, with many dimensions, with several policy areas, including transport, environment and enlargement that matter here. Political support to the process is also very important. National inputs to the Strategy's preparation must be enriched with that of regions and cities.

I would also expect regions within countries – and also across borders – to work together to set out the priorities for the Danube's regions and cities and then to work together in information gathering, that is required for a Strategy, to be involved in stocktaking exercise to identify what projects are currently being implemented and in what sectors, and in preparing and then implementing the strategy.

Partnership for the Danube strategy should go beyond national, regional and local authorities and include the private sector, business community, academia and non-governmental organisations. It will also be important to link the process of the preparation of the Strategy to a strong publicity and communication exercise.

Your priority areas do not come as surprise. Firstly, it is clear to all of us why transport is one of the key priorities. 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.

Secondly, the environmental dimension is 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. 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.

But I hope, especially in the context of the crisis, that you will not forget about the third priority: economic development along the Danube. 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. But it will be a living strategy, with new priorities emerging over time. I would stress two points here: firstly, there is a need for more genuine, new 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.

I am also wondering whether you will be brave enough to reach out to European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) to reinforce the territorial cooperation in the Danube area. The macro-regions are an enhanced form of cooperation, and EGTC could be seen as a way to improve coordination and implementation. This approach could be followed in the foreseen review of that regulation in 2011.

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. I am sure you will use this symbolism in communicating the Strategy.

A real need for this strategy has not come from Europe, it is a bottom up initiative. It gives the strategy a good start but also makes you responsible: the problems are serious but the opportunities are waiting to be grasped.

It will be a long job and your participation, through different channels, will be essential. You have to go for realistic, achievable actions, to find the right role for the executive bodies, the Commission and Member States, for regions, cities universities, businesses and citizens.

Actions in the short term are needed to ensure that strategy is more than words: that it leads to immediate action on the ground. But this strategy must work in the longer term, even after the enthusiasm we all feel now is displaced by familiarity and by other urgent priorities.

We have to ensure that the people who can really make things happen participate fully in the development of the strategy and the action plan.

I know you are committed to the Danube region and to the success of the strategy. It is important because in the future there will be more not less new challenges, problems and opportunities that do not recognise administrative and political borders. 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 and into Regions 2020 and EU 2020 documents - 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.

We are at the beginning of this exciting journey. It is not an overnight journey, so it is very important to understand the value of the process itself. I know that what matters are results but we must also exploit the added value of the process of working jointly on the strategy. It strengthens political and social capital needed to find common solutions.

We are here with the intention to offer this part of Europe a better future. We have around the Danube flourishing urban centres, historical universities, a rich tradition of cultural relations, good transport access and water resources and many other assets. There is room for improving cooperation, too. I would like to encourage you to put more emphasis on the cooperation between cities and towns, many of them share Danube banks. I am sure we all want to see more cooperation in research and development and innovation.

It is good that even before this formal framework of cooperation is established, MEPs already have the chance to exchange ideas in an informal structure, the Danube Forum.

To put it simply, we must work together. Past efforts have all too often been hampered by a lack of coherence – whether between institutions or in terms of priorities. Action has been too patchy to have any real and lasting impacts. But also we must work together in a practical way. People want to see action.