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European Parliament

Committee on Regional development

Draft speech of Ms Danuta Hübner

Chairwoman of the Committee on Regional Development

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Ladies and Gentleman,

It is great pleasure to see you again. It will be a year soon when we first met in Ulm, seems like yesterday. I am delighted to have this opportunity to address you - participants of a conference which opens a series of events aiming at the preparation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Today's discussions and workshops have given you insight into the process of the creation of the Strategy. You have also had the chance to give your first inputs on what should be the priority areas of intervention addressed by the Strategy.

As you probably all know, as Commissioner for Regional Policy I was deeply committed to bringing the Baltic Sea Strategy into life and equally strongly involved in the launch of a strategy for the Danube region. It is a pleasure to see the progress that has been made. My congratulations to all of you, to the colleagues in partner organisations in the regions and Member States as well as in the Commission, for your enthusiasm and commitment and for the preparatory work that I know has been accomplished.

But I am here not because of the past, but because of the future of the Strategy. I am deeply convinced about the rationale for this strategy. And I see two major arguments here. First, there are more not less new challenges, problems and opportunities that do not recognise administrative and political borders. As they are shared they require shared solutions. What you are working on now gives us a chance to identify territories in which this shared approach can be most effective and efficient. 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 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, and luckily we can draw - as much as we need - on the experience of the Baltic Sea Strategy. There are numerous valuable lessons that can be considered, and if you allow I would like to highlight some key elements. 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 must bring together and coordinate not only stakeholders from different territories but also stakeholders from different policy areas, from different sectors. This holistic approach would mirror the real life situation, the fact that the issues to tackle are interrelated and cannot be addressed in an isolated manner through actions in single sectors or single regions or Member States. I think it is important to use this process to gradually build a governance mechanism. Working together on preparing the strategy increases the chances to have a successful implementation of agreed actions. We should use the preparatory process to stimulate involvement of civil society. Their involvement in both, preparatory process and implementation of the strategy, can generate seeking of ownership and responsibility. In the case

of Danube Strategy the opening towards and involvement of civil society is even more relevant.

The process of drawing up the Baltic Sea Strategy 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.

There are of course limits to the extent the model of the Baltic can inspire us or be replicated here, solutions need to be "place-based", tailored to the realities and perspectives of the territory. We all know it and the real challenge is to strike the right balance between what can be learned from the Baltic strategy and what will be the Danube specificity. Here, the Commission's role will be essential in providing a reasonable and well justified link, this connection in a well-balanced manner. I am sure we can trust its wisdom and expertise.

Of course with this work on the Danube Strategy we do not enter a virgin territory. There are well established existing frameworks of cooperation in the area, many steps toward exchanging ideas and experience had already been undertaken in the past. European regional policy provides a programming framework and substantial part of financial resources for projects in the area. We know weakness of the link between programmes of regional policy, where more funding is available, the objective 1 and 2 programmes, but which do not allow for international cooperation, and

the territorial cooperation objective which has limited financial allocation. Nevertheless, however is available, must be used even better and we should link better with other sources of funding. 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 programs, 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.

You have already identified your basic priorities and list of projects is emerging. Three pillars have been defined aiming at improving connectivity and environmentally sustainable communication systems, at protecting the environment, preserving water resources and preventing natural risks as well as reinforcing socio-economic, human and institutional development. It would be useful if your three pillars could be supplemented with concerns of a more horizontal nature. But I am sure it will be a living strategy, open to new ideas and priorities.

We are here with the intention to offer this part of Europe a better future. We have here 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.

Finally, we should also look at this exciting exercise in a broader context. As I said earlier, the macro regional approach is enhanced by the fact that development challenges do not recognise political and administrative borders. The most obvious example is environmental pollution, but one could name others, that require solutions shared between regions, countries, businesses and their global partners. We are drawing up this strategy at a time of the debate on the future cohesion policy in the context of Europe 2020 strategy where territorial dimension of policies will be enhanced. Certainly it is the right time to ask questions about the relevance of this approach in the future architecture of cohesion policy.

I see two basic options. This bottom-up approach could replace the transnational strand of the objective 3, bringing into regional policy a functional geography approach. Or it could be allowed on exceptional basis as a specific bottom-up initiative in the policy.

As Chair of the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament, I can assure you that we will be with you in this search of better use of European regional policy potential.

You might know that already in 2006 the European Parliament urged the Commission to come up with a proposal for an EU Baltic Sea Strategy, and when the Communication on the Strategy was published the Committee on Regional Development welcomed and unanimously endorsed it. We are currently working on an initiative report on "The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the role of macro-regions in the future of cohesion policy" (rapporteur: Wojciech Michał Olejniczak, S&D). This report will allow Parliament to express its in-

depth views on the concept of macro-regions and their role in the future architecture of cohesion policy.

As regards the Danube Strategy, the EP has adopted a motion for resolution at the end of the last term, stating that an intergroup be set up for the promotion of the Danube River. Until this formal framework of cooperation is established MEPs already have the chance to exchange ideas in an informal structure, called the Danube Forum.

You might also be aware that last week, in its plenary session in Strasbourg Parliament has adopted a resolution¹ on a European Strategy for the Danube Region. The EP stressed the need to involve regional and local stakeholders in the Danube region through the whole process. We have 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.

Thank you for your attention.

¹ European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2010 on a European Strategy for the Danube Region, P7_TA-PROV(2010)0008