

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on ‘The Danube Region Strategy’

(2011/C 166/05)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- very much welcomes the European strategy for the Danube region (COM(2010) 715 final) (Danube Region Strategy), incorporating several of the recommendations put forward by the Committee of the Regions in its previous opinion of 7 October 2009. The Strategy is indeed of fundamental importance for regional and local cooperation within the Danube region;
- points out in particular that it is vital to the implementation and success of the strategy’s goals for all interested parties to be involved consistently and constantly, and to continue to be in future;
- welcomes the use of national and regional coordinators, though the communication contains only a broad outline of their tasks. Macroregions are in their infancy, and the Committee of the Regions therefore recommends that the coordinators within the strategy should meet regularly to exchange experience, and also that there should be opportunities for exchanges of experience between the Baltic Sea and Danube Region strategies;
- urges the European Commission to ensure that the project selection procedures for the macroregional strategies include sufficient safeguards to ensure that existing financing systems and sources of funding can in fact be used for the strategies;
- recommends looking into whether, due to the particular geographical, historical and cultural significance of the Danube region, the new macroregion means that the south-east Europe cooperation area under the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programme (strand B) could be adjusted accordingly. This would enable European cohesion policy to take account of the new Danube macroregion and allow for cooperation within a single cooperation area.

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Reference document	Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - The European Union strategy for the Danube region COM(2010) 715 final

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

General comments

1. very much welcomes the European strategy for the Danube region (COM(2010) 715 final) (Danube Region Strategy), incorporating several of the recommendations put forward by the Committee of the Regions in its previous opinion of 7 October 2009. The Strategy is indeed of fundamental importance for regional and local cooperation within the Danube region, as the European Parliament also acknowledged in its resolution of 17 February 2011;

2. notes that macroregions also pursue the objective of heightening the efficiency of the instruments in functional regions for cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation between Member States, regions and municipalities and, in accordance with the multi-level governance principle, of improving cooperation between the European, national, regional and local levels further so that the EU's policy objectives can be implemented more efficiently. The potential of the strategy for the Danube region lies, amongst other things, in cross-border, transnational and interregional solutions, and it represents a valuable tool for European integration policy;

3. feels that the territorial dimension of the strategy will help to flesh out the territorial cohesion objective introduced by the Lisbon Treaty as an EU objective; therefore asks the Commission to take a more in-depth look, in the form of a Green Paper, at the role and impact of macro-regions in post-2013 EU regional policy; in this context, points out that the Committee of the Regions already put this request to the European Commission in its resolution on the Commission's legislative and work programme for 2010;

4. recalls the position of the European Commission stating that macro-regional strategies should currently take into account the principle of "three no's" – no new regulation, no new institutions and no additional funding; thinks, however, that there should also be "three yeses": jointly agreed application and monitoring of existing rules in the macro-region; creation – for which EU bodies should be responsible – of a platform, network or territorial cluster of regional and local authorities and Member States which also brings in stakeholders; agreed use of existing Union funding for developing and implementing macro-regional strategies;

5. emphasises that the European Danube region strategy is perfectly compatible with the development of Euro-regions focusing on cooperation between border regions or the development of European structures in the context of cross-border, transnational and interregional projects assuming the legal form of a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC);

6. points out that the Commission's communication stresses that the world's most international river is now largely a European Union (EU) space and that "there are new opportunities to address its challenges and potential". The Danube Region Strategy is the second macroregional strategy of this kind that the Commission has produced in just one and a half years. This indicates that there is an increased need for more efficient cooperation within the EU, with the strategy for the new Danube region macroregion being an example of that;

7. stresses that, in view of the particular significance of European territorial cooperation, which is one of the three pillars of European cohesion policy, macroregions form a constructive framework for networked thinking, focused action and thus more efficient use of the existing coordination and funding structures to serve the Europe 2020 objectives;

8. notes that the broad-based consultation process is an absolute must in ensuring acceptance for the Danube Region Strategy and that it reflects the established needs of all national, regional and local stakeholders, who identify with the macroregion as a functionally unified, natural, cultural, social and economic space;

9. points out in particular that it is vital to the implementation and success of the strategy's goals for all interested parties, expert institutions, interregional, regional and local networks, local and regional authorities in the Danube region, institutions with responsibility for regional development, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and all Member and non-Member States within the Danube regions to be involved consistently and constantly, and to continue to be in future;

10. underlines the particular importance and responsibility of the Danube area which consists of EU Member States, EU accession candidates, potential accession candidates and countries which are included in the European Neighbourhood Policy. The macroregion covers 14 countries in total: the Member States Germany (the *Länder* of Baden-Württemberg and

Bavaria), Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, and the non-Member States Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Ukraine and Moldova. It provides a real opportunity to smooth the way for economic growth, prosperity and security, and the strategy can help to make the Danube region "one of the most attractive in Europe", as the Commission puts it. The Danube region is home to around 115 million people and covers a fifth of the territory of the EU;

11. emphasises that the need for a common strategy was raised at the initiative of the countries, *Länder* and regions concerned and that there is a growing shared recognition that the manifold tasks and challenges can only be dealt with in concert. The Committee of the Regions notes that the high degree to which people identify with the Danube region makes the strategy a highly effective tool in long-term peacekeeping, which provides stability and security not just for the regions concerned but for the whole of the EU;

12. notes that the Danube Region Strategy helps to further promote democracy and the rule of law, decentralisation and greater local and regional self-government in the Danube region, particularly in those countries that are not EU Member States. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Danube region has also formed a link between East and West; as such, it helps to overcome Europe's internal and external borders and to develop its natural, cultural, social, economic and scientific diversity and dynamism;

13. sees cooperation at all levels – national, regional and local – as absolutely vital in respecting the principles of subsidiarity, partnership and proximity to the citizens, and also highlights the added value that regional and local cooperation in the Danube region brings to the pre-accession process for candidate and potential candidate countries;

The EU strategy and its substance

Challenges and tasks for the Danube macroregion

14. welcomes the Commission's statement that "the Danube can open the EU to its near neighbours, the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus and Central Asia". Macroregional strategies are a perfect example of cooperation between neighbours, both within the EU and between the EU and non-Member States, and they also demonstrate how integrated, multisectoral approaches can be combined with multilevel governance and put into practice;

15. agrees with the Commission that socioeconomic development, competitiveness, environmental management and resource efficient growth can be improved, and mobility and security further enhanced;

16. notes that the structure of the Danube Region Strategy has been built upon the experiences gained from that of the

Baltic Sea Strategy. In order to implement the strategy in practice, an action plan was drawn up with the cooperation of all national, regional and local stakeholders and interested parties. This action plan was divided into four pillars with 11 priority areas, and contained 124 individual project examples;

17. particularly welcomes the fact that the Danube Region Strategy proposes concrete, measurable target examples that should bring results that people can see;

18. feels that macro-regional strategies should not cover the full range of policies but initially concentrate on shared challenges in the macro-region which have been jointly identified using a partnership-based approach; therefore welcomes the decision to focus on cooperation in four pillars: connecting the Danube region (mobility, sustainable energy, promoting culture and tourism); protecting the environment (water quality, environmental risk management, maintaining biodiversity); building prosperity in the Danube region (developing the knowledge-based society through research, education and information technologies, promoting the competitiveness of businesses, including the formation of clusters, investment in skills); and strengthening the Danube region (improving institutional capacities and cooperation, increasing security, combating serious and organised crime);

19. points out that the involvement of the national, regional and local levels will be crucial to achieving the objectives. Where necessary, appropriate action should be taken to put local and regional stakeholders in a better position to develop appropriate implementation structures to achieve the objectives. The processes of capacity building and good governance are key elements in implementing the strategy in the Danube region, in which connection the Council of Danube Regions and Cities (RDSR) could be an active partner in the development of joint projects;

20. generally sees the action plan as an important reference document and welcomes the Commission's characterisation of it as an indicative framework that is based on the status of the projects and can evolve dynamically;

21. notes that there is significant added value to be gained from closer links between existing networks, initiatives and organisations such as the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), the Danube Commission, the Regional Cooperation Council, the Danube Cooperation Process, the RDSR, the Working Community (ARGE) of the Danube States, and the Danube Tourist Commission;

Including young people

22. draws attention to the fact that the active involvement of younger people is one of the cornerstones in securing permanent peace and stability in Europe;

23. notes that the action plan provides scope for projects with and for young people, but believes that the role and significance of the next generation should be given greater weight. It is vitally important to pass our shared values onto young Europeans in an ongoing process of exchange and joint communication, and to raise young people's awareness of democratic processes and of understanding, tolerance and respect for minorities and for the cultural and ethnic diversity of Europe's regions. The incalculable value of school exchanges and youth exchanges, workshops, networks and cooperation opportunities for young people should not be underestimated;

24. calls for greater attention to be paid to this aspect when further developing the action plan, including in the context of existing mobility programmes. The "Young Citizens Danube Network" (YCDN), based in Novi Sad, is a good example of how young people can forge a Danube regional identity, and thus also a European identity. Another example would be the establishment of a "Danube Youth Foundation" to organise interaction, exchange, education and cooperation between young people on a long-term basis;

Transport

25. acknowledges the importance of implementing the transport objectives, particularly in inland navigation and road, rail and air infrastructure, and shares the Commission's assessment that more progress needs to be made in implementing the TEN-T projects and rail freight corridors according to Regulation (EU) No 913/2010; the progressiveness of the Danube strategy should be particularly highlighted because of the importance of linking these corridors with each other and with the regional environment, as well as linking various modes of transport;

26. feels that greater use needs to be made of the Danube's potential. The priority goals within the Strategy's first pillar on connecting the Danube Region through improving mobility are to increase cargo transport on the Danube, to create north-south connections, and to develop efficient terminals at Danube river ports and open them up to modern, multimodal, interoperable use. Simultaneously agrees with Commission on the need of applying an integrated approach for balancing the developments with sustainability of environment;

27. refers to the Belgrade Convention which regulates navigation on the Danube;

Environment

28. emphasises the prime importance of environmental protection, and in particular the need to ensure that water quality complies with the EU Water Framework Directive. The Committee of the Regions agrees that "sustainable water management is needed", and the River Basin Management Plan is an important benchmark in this connection. Priority should be given to measures aimed at conserving the natural flood retention capacity of the Danube basin and preventing the recurrence of floods. Besides, the Danube includes several Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation

relating to Natura 2000 as well as the Danube Delta, which has been on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1991; it therefore represents a unique and fragile ecosystem which is home to various rare species threatened by pollution. In view of this, we must halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems, and maintain diversity of species, and ensure that EU funding is spent on projects consistent with implementation of European environmental legislation. These goals should be reflected in the objectives and specific programmes of the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) and national agricultural support schemes;

29. stresses that it is of central concern that good water quality should be ensured in line with the Water Framework Directive, that nutrient levels in the Danube should be reduced, that the delta management plan should be completed and adopted by 2013, that Danube-wide flood risk management plans should be implemented, that effective management plans should be drawn up for all Natura 2000 sites, that viable populations of Danube sturgeon and other species should be secured and that soil erosion should be reduced. The ICPDR and the tools available to the Commission, such as Global Monitoring for Environment and Security (GMES) and Common Agriculture Policy instruments, will have an important role to play in these objectives; the structures, knowledge and instruments already available in this area should be optimised in line with the strategy, particularly with regard to counteracting the risk of, for example, floods and natural disasters;

30. stresses the need for enhanced regional cooperation in order to reduce the risk and potential effects of natural disasters, in particular floods, drought, forest fires, storms, erosion, icing and water scarcity, as well as industrial accidents by strengthened disaster management including prevention, preparedness and response;

31. notes that the transport and environment aspects of the sustainable development of the Danube region should respect the fundamental principles set out in the "Joint Statement on Guiding Principles for the Development of Inland Navigation and Environmental Protection in the Danube River Basin" by the ICPDR and the International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC);

32. stresses the importance of promoting sustainable tourism in the regions and draws attention to the potential of a cycle path along most of the river;

Energy

33. notes that investing in energy infrastructure, promoting sustainable energy and improving the coordination of energy policies are quite rightly prioritised in the Danube Region Strategy. Modernising energy networks, implementing the European Energy Programme and reinforcing the TEN-E network could bring about significant improvements for the region. It is also important to achieve the national climate and energy targets by 2020;

Economy

34. underlines the importance of building prosperity in the Danube region, of increasing the competitiveness of businesses and developing clusters, of boosting economic strength, of reviving and improving the labour market, and of providing better opportunities for disadvantaged groups. The Committee of the Regions would also highlight the role of metropolitan areas as centres of productivity, innovation and exchange;

35. emphasises the point made by the European Commission that *"one third of EU's population at risk of poverty, many from marginalised groups, live in the area (the Danube macro-region). 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"*; feels that this warrants a special territorial approach to the flagship initiative on the platform against poverty and social exclusion;

36. points out that the regions, cities and municipalities have a key role in making contact and in supporting projects by small and medium-sized enterprises. The Committee of the Regions also notes that experience with the Baltic Sea Strategy shows that the private sector should be more closely involved;

37. stresses that increasing prosperity and competitiveness should go hand in hand with improving and protecting natural resources over the long term;

38. highlights the importance of creating a business-friendly framework for a competitive market economy, in order to provide small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Danube region with the greatest possible opportunities for development;

39. notes that, not least due to the limited size of national markets, SMEs are a key factor in a prosperous Danube region. Agriculture, craft trades, industry and the service sector should be given equal consideration here. Fit-for-purpose vocational training, such as training for skilled workers, and science and research are important elements in the innovative competitiveness of the Danube region. A strong technology transfer system should encourage the rapid implementation of research results into commercial practice;

40. highlights, in this connection, the importance of developing equal access to digital infrastructure and promoting its use throughout the Danube region, in order to significantly reduce the technology gap between countries in access to and use of such infrastructure, which is large in some cases;

Education and research

41. notes that improving education and qualification opportunities in the region will significantly increase its attractiveness

as an economic and scientific centre. For example, actions and opportunities in "dual" theoretical/practical training systems could help to improve young people's skills;

42. stresses that there should be a particular emphasis on targeted support and assistance for research infrastructure and multilateral networks of universities and colleges in the Danube region. Network institutions such as the Andrassy University Budapest and the European Danube Academy are especially important here, because of their research and teaching focus on the Danube region;

Culture and civil society

43. stresses that the unique natural, cultural and ethnic diversity within the Danube region should be maintained as part of cultural projects and made accessible and tangible by means of sustainable tourism concepts;

44. highlights the role of the regional and local authorities, of their affiliations and associations and of civil society in promoting intercultural dialogue. Regions, cities and municipalities are in a particularly good position to integrate their experiences with diverse populations effectively into intercultural and inter-faith dialogue;

45. also points, in this connection, to the importance of civil society and of local authority partnerships, which not only contribute to intercultural dialogue and to breaking down prejudices, but can also form a framework for economic and social cooperation, promote sustainable development and thus make a positive contribution to implementing the goals of the Europe 2020 strategy. Cooperation between people and institutions working in the cultural sector in the regions and cities in the Danube region may also help to develop a network with a high creative potential;

46. points out that the development and maintenance of social networks and structures requires a high degree of involvement from the public, and that lifelong and inter-generational learning should be strengthened;

Good governance and security

47. emphasises the high priority of the targets under the pillar "strengthening the Danube region", in particular of reinforcing the rule of law as a precondition for improving structures and capacity for private and public sector decision-making and for combating trafficking in human beings, smuggling of goods, corruption, serious and organised crime and cross-border black markets;

48. notes that the exchange of experiences concerning good administrative practice in cooperation between the national, regional, municipal and local levels and in all areas of public services is an important building block in developing good governance, not least across national and administrative borders;

The EU strategy and its implementation

Coordination

49. welcomes the fact that the Commission is continuing to coordinate policy with the Member States. Following the example of the Baltic Sea Strategy, however taking into account the specificities of the Danube area, the Danube Region Strategy is also to have a High Level Group with representatives from all Member States to support the Commission's work, and representatives from the non-Member States are to should also be invited to its meetings. The communication does not specify how frequently the policy orientations should be evaluated and the action plan updated; these aspects should be clarified;

50. welcomes the use of national and regional coordinators, though the communication contains only a broad outline of their tasks. Macroregions are in their infancy, and the Committee of the Regions therefore recommends that the coordinators within the strategy should meet regularly to exchange experience, and also that there should be opportunities for exchanges of experience between the Baltic Sea and Danube Region strategies. On the basis of experience gained with the Baltic Sea Strategy, the Committee of the Regions calls for the option of providing technical assistance for coordination activities to be examined;

51. also notes, in this connection, that regular forums for all national, regional and local stakeholders and for interested parties and civil society are an appropriate way of reviewing projects, taking a critical look at policy orientations and increasing public acceptance of the strategy;

52. calls for the results of the studies on the Danube region by the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) to be taken into account when coordinating the objectives;

Reporting

53. feels that it is important to monitor progress in implementing the action plan. Annual reports on the existing programmes and strategic reporting at Member State level form the foundations for this, and should be prepared by the coordinators. The reporting requirements for the EU programmes should focus on the currently available data for the current subsidy period;

Implementation

54. notes that national, regional and local stakeholders all contribute to the success of the projects, but the administrative implementation of the strategy presents challenges due to a lack of support for the creation of structures. The communication calls for concrete projects to be proposed that are "detailed and require a project leader, a timeframe and financing". The Committee of the Regions suggests that an evaluation of the implementation strategy be allowed for after a year, in order to optimise processes and decision making;

Funding and subsidies

55. points out that the communication makes only general statements regarding the funding of the Danube Region Strategy, and takes note of the Commission's position that the macroregions should not be given preferential treatment with regard to budgets or legislation. During the current funding period, the strategy should be implemented by mobilising or aligning existing funding, in line with overall frameworks;

56. urges the Commission to ensure that the project selection procedures for the macroregional strategies include sufficient safeguards to ensure that existing financing systems and sources of funding can in fact be used for the strategies;

57. urges the Commission to ensure that support programmes in fields such as youth work and ICT provision can also be applied to the macroregional strategies;

58. recommends examining the extent to which targeted further training could be provided for applicants at national, regional and local level, particularly from 2014 onwards, in order to strengthen people's ability to draw on funding and to help to ensure that greater use is made of existing funding sources and instruments in practice;

59. notes that the success of the objectives also depends on the Member States and local and regional authorities in the Danube region, as well as institutions responsible for regional development, making use of the environmental programmes promoted by the Commission, such as LIFE+ (redevelopment of rivers and riverside systems) and the Intelligent Energy Europe (IEE) programme;

60. believes that efforts by non-governmental organisations, economic and social stakeholders and regional and local authorities to promote cross-border and transnational projects play a central role. The Structural Funds and relevant programmes within cohesion policy are important tools that should be used sensibly and effectively to put projects into practice;

61. recommends looking into whether, due to the particular geographical, historical and cultural significance of the Danube region, the new macroregion means that the south-east Europe cooperation area under the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) programme (strand B) could be adjusted accordingly. This would enable European cohesion policy to take account of the new Danube macroregion and allow for cooperation within a single cooperation area, thus facilitating:

a. in particular, more effective use of the region's potential in the strategic policy fields of infrastructure, waterways, energy, innovation, the environment, flood protection and sustainable economy,

- b. the targeted, sustainable and efficient exploitation of shared economic and scientific potential,
- c. the transfer of innovations within the Danube region,
- d. greater synergies, both in connection with cooperation between the national, regional and local levels and at cross-sector level between policy fields, thus increasing the performance and effectiveness of this region and of the EU as a whole,
- e. a better understanding of the Danube region in its overall natural, cultural and historical dimension as a unified area within Europe;
62. notes in this connection that a cooperation area would be of benefit to the dynamic development of the Danube region. The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) are flexible measures for integrating EU candidate and potential candidate countries and third countries into the cooperation area.

Brussels, 31 March 2011.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
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