

**Informal Meeting of the Foreign Ministers from the Danube Region
St. Pölten, Austria, 22 October 2012**

JOINT STATEMENT

The informal meeting of Foreign Affairs Ministers from the Danube Region took place in St. Pölten, Austria, on 22 October 2012 in the presence of Commissioner for Regional Policy Johannes Hahn and was preceded by the annual governmental conference of the Working Group Danube Region (ARGE Donauländer).

A follow up to the informal foreign ministerial meeting on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region organized in Bucharest last year (November, 7-8), the St. Polten meeting reinforced the prevailing opinion that continued political guidance is needed to maintain the dynamics of the EUSDR process and the overall commitment to the implementation of the Action Plan.

The main subjects discussed by the Ministers were first experiences with and perspectives for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), efficient planning and coordination for a coherent implementation of the Strategy and the roles of towns and regions as catalysts for cooperation in the Danube region.

Ministers agreed that good cooperation between the countries of the Danube Region will speed up the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy (by having projects with a bigger impact) and will improve the quality of results (by an exchange of experiences).

Ministers expressed their gratitude to all actors and stakeholders of all levels who have supported the Strategy so far. They stressed the importance of continuous support for National Contact Points and Priority Area Coordinators for the implementation of the strategy. The support given by European Institutions has also been of particular importance and shall be sustained. Ministers thanked Commissioner Hahn in particular for his personal commitment to the joint endeavors.

Ministers agreed that the implementation of the EUSDR has taken off very well since mid-2011. The process has already strengthened the cooperation between Danube Region countries – both EU-member states and non-member states. EUSDR governance structures have successfully been put in place, first synergies between existing and new activities have been identified, and the process has already triggered joint activities and new common projects.

Concerning the next phase, Ministers stressed the importance of focusing the work on the following:

- Strengthening the transnational cooperation must not become an end in itself. The work should clearly focus on improving the policy-delivery at all levels (EU, national, regional). An even better focus on cooperation in policy making, including a long-term cooperation framework, outputs, results and impacts will provide further incentives for a balanced and effective participation of stakeholders from all the Danube Region countries.
- The European Commission shall further support the Strategy process. In complement, countries of the Danube Region will have to take an enhanced leading role in implementing the EUSDR themselves and ensure that goals, targets and actions at national level correspond to those of the Strategy.

- The preparation phase for the EU-programming period 2014-2020 provides a window of opportunity for linking the Strategy better with public and private financing instruments. Addressing broad challenges identified in the Strategy demands the use of a comprehensive set of EU, national and regional policies and instruments.
- Continued EU involvement in the Danube Region by means, inter alia, of flagship projects and priority actions within the new Cohesion Policy programs in all Danube Region states and by making full use of synergies with other relevant EU instruments is of paramount importance. Cohesion Policy can thus contribute to the comprehensive development of the Danube Region and further strengthen the cooperation between the participating countries.
- Seeking synergies with all relevant EU programs and funds, including the EU Pre-Accession and Neighbourhood programs, and Territorial Cooperation programs, will also contribute to ensuring a pragmatic, overall encompassing and future-oriented approach for the implementation of the EUSDR goals.
- Positive interactions between the Governance structure of the EUSDR and relevant public and private stakeholders at national and regional levels are essential for ensuring a lasting success of the EUSDR. Raising awareness and providing information about the potentials and even closer cooperation in the Danube Region will have to remain a priority of work. Furthermore, there is still a need to involve actors from the regional and local level, as well as the civil society and the private sectors.

Ministers agreed that the spirit of cooperation as experienced in the Danube Strategy shall serve in general as a guiding principle when addressing issues linked with the Danube Region.

This Joint Statement shall contribute to the debate at the First Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region on 27-28 November 2012 in Regensburg, Germany, thus feeding into the discussions on the First Implementation Report by the European Commission.