

Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of the Danube countries Bucharest, 28 October 2013

The meeting of the Foreign Affairs Ministers from the Danube Region took place in Bucharest, Romania, on 28 October 2013 in the presence of the European Commissioner for Regional Policy Johannes Hahn. The meeting was, for the first time, linked with the Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), taking place in Bucharest, in the Palace of Parliament on 28 and 29 October 2013. Together, the Annual Forum and the Meeting of the ministers of Foreign Affairs or other high level political representatives represent the main political event of the EUSDR, giving strategic direction to the process and creating common approaches.

Ministers expressed their satisfaction that the Danube Strategy is proving its added value, both strategically and politically, as stated by the Council Conclusions on the added value of macro-regional strategies adopted by the General Affairs Council on 22 October last.

Ministers acknowledged the successful start of the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and welcomed the projects and initiatives already developed, drawing on the Commission Reports on EUSDR implementation, and the Council Conclusion regarding the added value of macro-regional strategies.

Ministers reiterated that continued political guidance and coordination of efforts are needed to consolidate implementation, and agreed on the need for more coordinated action under the Danube Strategy, in close correlation with the EU 2020 objectives and programming for the EU multiannual framework 2014-2020.

Ministers underlined that embedding the EUSDR into the future cohesion policy instruments is crucial. Successful implementation of the Danube Strategy in this upcoming EU-programming period requires embedding of the Strategy objectives in Partnership Agreements, in accordance with the needs of the programmes area, as well as in operational programmes texts, in line with national development priorities as well as EU 2020 objectives. This facilitates alignment of all policies, programmes, and funds, including country-specific ones, private sources and support from financial institutions.

Synergies among all relevant EU programmes and funds, including the EU Pre-Accession and Neighbourhood programmes, and Territorial Cooperation programmes, ensure a pragmatic, comprehensive and future-oriented approach for achieving EUSDR goals. Better use can be made of existing territorial cooperation through cross border and transnational programmes, with clear focus on improving the policy-delivery at all levels (European, national, regional).

Ministers thanked the priority area steering groups and co-ordinators for the excellent work done so far and discussed strengthening the governance of the EUSDR in order to secure efficient planning and strategic coordination for a coherent implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

Ministers underlined that building upon existing regional cooperation formats and fora, which have particular relevance in the context of the enlargement process, such as the Central European Initiative, the Regional Co-operation Council, the South East Europe Cooperation Process, including those opening towards the Black Sea, will broaden the horizon of the Strategy, with benefits for the whole region.

Complementing the Strategy with an outward-looking regional development approach will strengthen existing strategic linkages with the Baltic Sea Region among others with connections to the extended Black Sea region and, beyond it, to the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Ministers welcome the important role of the European Commission as an overall coordinator and facilitator of the EU Strategy for the Danube region, as well as the support of the European Parliament, the involvement of the Committee of the Regions and the commitment of the countries concerned and their national and regional governments, parliaments and all stakeholders. In this respect Ministers welcome the initiative of two Danube parliamentary conferences that took place in 2013. Ministers commended Commissioner Hahn in particular for his personal commitment to the joint regional endeavour. The key role of the Commission in further implementation of the Strategy was underlined.

The Ministers agreed that the role of Foreign Ministers or other high level political representatives meetings on the margins of Annual Fora as a political vector of the EUSDR, providing political coordination and strategic guidance for the process, should be enhanced and close cooperation with national programming authorities maintained in order to ensure concrete results. It was agreed that these high level political representatives can play a more active role in mobilising their colleagues from line ministries in their national governments for implementing the Danube Strategy. National coordination should enhance the work on the regional and local level and by non-governmental stakeholders. This approach should boost cooperation among the national governmental institutions, as well as coordination of national priorities of the countries in the region.

This political guidance should be reinforced by a follow-up working mechanism, based on EUSDR National Contact Point regular meetings, involving the central programming authorities as appropriate. One of the objectives is coordination between Strategy implementation and the programming and implementation process of EU funds for 2014-2020 as well as national and regional funds in all Danube countries, including through possible alignment of national resources as well as allocations for the financing of major common projects. This mechanism should also contribute to the preparation of the Annual Fora.

Underlining the Council Conclusions recently adopted, ministers welcomed the fact that the cooperation platform established by the Danube Strategy between EU members and non-EU countries creates an equal participatory basis, and plays an active role in connecting these countries to the EU standards and values. In this context, ministers underlined the necessity to enhance access of the non-EU countries to transnational and cross-boundary projects relevant to the EUSDR, namely through IPA and ENI and other EU external instruments and funds for the development, *inter alia*, of transport, environment, energy and ICT infrastructure projects.

Ministers agreed that the spirit of cooperation as experienced in the Danube Strategy should serve in general as a guiding principle when addressing issues linked with the Danube Region, in complementarity and coherence with the general framework of the EU water diplomacy policy.

The present Joint Statement shall contribute to the debates of the second Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region on 28-29 October 2013 in Bucharest, thus feeding into the discussions on the next meeting of the Foreign Ministers or other high level political representatives and the third EUSDR Annual Forum to be held in Vienna in 2014.

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