

Joint Statement of the Ministers Responsible for the Implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Brdo pri Kranju, 24 October 2023

We, the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (hereinafter referred to as "EUSDR"), gathered on 24 October 2023 on the occasion of the 12th Annual Forum of the EUSDR jointly organised by the Republic of Slovenia, the European Commission and the Danube Region Programme with the support of the Danube Strategy Point:

Acknowledge that the Danube macro-region in the second decade of its existence faces some of the most significant challenges, in the field of energy, economic situation, health (caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) and the continuation of Russia's unprovoked military invasion of Ukraine.

Condemn in the strongest terms the continuation of Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war of aggression against Ukraine. **Express** full solidarity with the people of Ukraine, **reiterate** full support for the country's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, within its internationally recognised borders, including territorial waters, and **encourage** all EUSDR stakeholders to make use of the structures offered by the EUSDR in supporting Ukraine now and in contributing to its reconstruction.

Consider Russia's repeated military strikes on Danube port infrastructure, grain storage facilities and surrounding areas as undermining global food security by posing a significant threat to the freedom of navigation on the Danube as well as an environmental threat to the Danube ecosystem on both sides of the river. **Encourage** discussion of possible ways to effectively counteract obstruction of free trade navigation.

Express solidarity with the people in the regions severely affected by natural disasters this summer. Their homes were devastated, as was public infrastructure and agricultural land. **Reconfirm** the importance of the macro-regional and EU cooperation on preparedness and response to natural disasters and reconstruction. **Encourage the** enhanced cooperation of officials and volunteer organisations within the EUSDR.

Welcome the EU candidate status granted to Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina, herewith making all countries participating in the EUSDR now either member states of the EU or accession candidates. **Recognise** the renewed momentum of the EU enlargement process and **confirm** full commitment of all candidate countries participating in the EUSDR to their EU membership perspective. **Encourage** participating countries and regions to explore all cooperation and capacity-building networks within the EUSDR to contribute to accelerated EU accession process and **invite** all EUSDR core

stakeholders to make best use of multi-stakeholder engagement, connecting local, regional and national levels in this process.

Confirm our commitment to cooperation within the framework of the EUSDR to overcome existing and new challenges in the Danube Region and **emphasise** the importance of sustainable regional development, creating synergies between macro-regional strategies and the EU Cohesion Policy. In this context, **welcome** the initiative of the Slovenian EUSDR Presidency on empowering cooperation of all EUSDR stakeholders in the fields of visibility, stakeholder involvement and funding for implementation.

Recognise the key roles of the EUSDR National Coordinators as core strategic decision-makers in the EUSDR and of the EUSDR Priority Area Coordinators and the Steering Group members as key facilitators in the implementation and promotion of the Strategy. **Encourage** empowered engagement of stakeholders in the EUSDR Priority Areas and **reaffirm** the indispensable role of the Danube Strategy Point as the Strategy's secretariat, contributing to institutional memory, continuity and efficient implementation of the EUSDR. **Emphasise** the role of the European Commission as a key strategic coordination partner of the EUSDR and call on the Commission to strengthen the involvement of all its relevant services in the core governance of the EUSDR. **Encourage** future EUSDR TRIO Presidencies to actively pursue synergies and cooperation with other EU macro-regional strategies.

Appreciate the establishment and efforts of the first Danube Youth Council (DYC) and **look forward** to its further active involvement in the Strategy. **Recognise** valuable contributions of DYC members to the implementation of the objectives of EUSDR Priority Areas as well as to the EUSDR Presidency's priorities. **Call** for the continuation of an ambitious DYC working programme and for continued capacity-building support and guidance provided by the Danube Strategy Point, and by applying the POPRI method, a capacity building tool enhancing leadership and entrepreneurial skills of young people. **Recognise** the need to explore solutions addressing local and regional talent retention and development.

Welcome the initiative of exploring possible policy measures, actively supported by regional and national stakeholders such as the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) and the European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) in the field of knowledge excellence, which are pioneering European legal forms of cooperation designed to facilitate and enhance cross-border activities across the European Union. These policy measures need to be harmonised and implemented in the next decades to ensure a socially and economically sustainable and knowledge-driven, competitive society. Based on the outcomes of EC Strategic Foresight, **recognise** the need for more digital, sustainable, personal, social and civic skills and competencies in the Danube Region. **Support** the development of methods and processes of strategic foresight, based on global and EU data, taking into account the needs of the Danube Region. Furthermore, **invite** policymakers and stakeholders to take into account, as much as possible, recommendations made by the DYC concerning talent retention and development in the Danube Region. Also, **take into account** the recommendations of

the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC) based on DRC Strategic Foresight and DRC Initiative Fund projects.

Take note of the profound changes resulting from rapid development of artificial intelligence and **recognise** the need for its regulation without hampering innovation to serve the societies and economies in the Danube Region on their path to sustainable development. **Encourage** strengthening synergies and exchanges between different policymakers and stakeholders to improve cooperation on science, technology and innovation (STI) and education and training cooperation between countries and regions, to establish new Skills Academies, European Universities alliances and Innovation valleys/hubs. **Strengthen** the Danube Region to become the perspective region for quality of study and research for young talents, by enabling the knowledge providers to open their programmes and infrastructure in line with the principles of the Open Access policy and joint research and studies from and to the Danube Region.

Recognise the need to accelerate the green energy transition while ensuring the security of energy supply and support the efforts of the EUSDR in searching for synergies and more intense exchange of best practices among the countries of the Danube Region in deploying clean energy technologies. **Continue** to promote the diversification of energy supply sources and thereby contribute to reducing the dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

Highlight the significance of implementing the European Green Deal in the fight against climate change and environmental degradation and its alignment with the EUSDR's priorities in securing water quality, prevent environmental risks and safeguard biodiversity, protect natural landscapes and secure air and soil quality in the Danube Region. **Emphasise**, in the context of the European Green Deal, the importance of reduced bureaucracy and simplified procedures for its implementation.

Reaffirm the important role of transport in the economic, social and sustainable development in the Danube Region as well as the necessity of investment in the development and improvement of transport infrastructure in the Danube Region. Therefore, **call** upon all interested parties of the EUSDR to strengthen mutual infrastructure connections, develop new logistic routes and seek solutions on sustainable ways to close gaps and remove bottlenecks in the Danube Region transport network, including the support for mobility projects with macro-regional added value. In this regard, **emphasise** the focus on joint activities that promote smart transport infrastructure and services in order to improve their attractiveness and competitiveness by using the latest available technologies and, at the same time, **promote** sustainable modes of transport that support the common goals of climate and environmental protection. Furthermore, **encourage** enhancing the EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes and support the improvement of connections to the Western Balkan region bringing them closer to the EU (Green Lanes).

Take note of the thorough process of aligning the EUSDR priorities with EU, national and regional funds, which is also known as "embedding", and the possibilities provided by embedding the EUSDR in relevant cohesion policy programmes as well as IPA / NDICI

funds. **Acknowledge** the support of the Danube Region Programme in the implementation of the EUSDR and appreciate the decision to consider the entire territory of Ukraine as eligible in the Calls for Proposals. **Highlight** the importance of the networks of managing and programming authorities active in the EUSDR as efficient tools enabling intensified communication and coordination in the field of EUSDR implementation. Furthermore, **call** on the Commission and its services relevant for embedding activities, in particular DG REGIO and DG NEAR, to provide strong support in this process throughout the entire funding period, and to support the process of monitoring the embedding results.

Appreciate the regular organisation of the DARIF Joint Operations since 2013 to develop criminal and law enforcement cooperation along the Danube waterway and conferences at the political level, namely the 3rd Danube Security Conference of Ministers of Interior of EUSDR countries, held at the Representation of the Free State of Bavaria in Brussels on 23–24 March 2023, and the conference “The Danube Region at the turn of times – actively shaping the transformation. Solution approaches for politics and business” on 10 July 2023 in Stuttgart, Baden-Württemberg.

Encourage to continue organising ministerial meetings and other political events also on other EUSDR thematic areas at regional, national and EU levels to deepen the political ownership of the EUSDR and call for a revival of annual Danube Parliamentary Conferences as one of the main tools for enhancing the political commitment and visibility of the EUSDR.

In conclusion we, the Ministers of the EUSDR, **appreciate** the work done so far and the efforts made by the stakeholders at a time when the EUSDR has entered its second decade of existence. We **confirm** our political engagement and will continue to rally our efforts to strengthen cooperation within the EUSDR, as well as to provide political guidelines for further development of the Strategy, unlocking the full potential of the Danube Region.

Finally, we **entrust** the EUSDR Presidency 2024 to Austria and wish it every success in chairing the Strategy.