



Joint Statement of Ulm on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Ulm, 29 October 2015

On the margins of the 4th Annual Forum of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), Ministers in charge of EU Funds, European Affairs or European Integration from the participating States and Regions and the European Commissioner for Regional Policy gathered in Ulm and agreed on the following joint statement.

Building up on the positive experience of previous meetings of line ministers, the participants welcomed this ministerial meeting focusing on the link between the EUSDR and different programmes and funds. They agreed that full-fledged ownership of the EUSDR, based on the commitments made by the participating countries, requires active engagement of all relevant ministers to align policies and funding with the Strategy.

Currently the Danube Region countries' average GDP per capita only reaches about two-thirds of the level of the EU 28 Member States and less than 60% of the level of the OECD countries. In addition, there are major development disparities within the Danube Region, which hinder social, economic and territorial cohesion. The development of sustainable initiatives, projects and investments, especially in less developed regions, is a key factor in stimulating economic growth. European, national and regional funds play a crucial role in supporting the necessary investments in infrastructure, economic development, human capital and strengthening institutional and administrative capacity.

Ministers reiterated that the success of the EUSDR implementation requires the alignment of relevant programmes and use of these EU Funds in line with the EUSDR Priority Areas and targets.

Ministers welcomed the new opportunities, requirements and obligations laid down in the Cohesion Policy regulations and took note of the chances to use funds in a better and more efficient manner. Recalling the two "Joint technical Meetings of the EUSDR in the programming process for 2014-2020" of April 2013 in Bucharest and of June 2013 in Stuttgart on embedding the EUSDR in the Partnership Agreements and 2014 – 2020 European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) Programmes and the equivalent instruments for non-EU countries (notably the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, and the European Neighbourhood Instrument), Ministers agreed that it is now vital to put into practice the provisions set out in the programming documents wherever appropriate and committed themselves to do so.

Ministers emphasised that EUSDR countries should put all efforts in using other possible funding sources on national, regional or local level and called upon the European Commission to further enable stronger synergies between EU Macro-Regional Strategies, regional multilateral agreements and EU Programmes directly

managed by the European Commission such as Horizon 2020, Erasmus+, Creative Europe, COSME, LIFE, CEF and the EU Fund for Strategic Investments.

Ministers agreed that the link between the European Territorial Cooperation Programmes (known as Interreg) and the EUSDR is crucial. These Programmes play an important role in fostering territorial cooperation in the Danube Region and in developing new transnational and cross-border projects. By including non-EU Countries, they can also contribute to enhance cohesion and cooperation and foster economic development and European integration within the Danube Region. In this respect, Ministers welcomed the recent adoption of the Danube Transnational Programme by the European Commission. At the same time the role of the Investment for Growth and Jobs Programmes in the Danube Region needs to be more emphasized and promoted where appropriate.

Ministers also acknowledged that enhanced cooperation and coordination generate significant benefits to all interested parties. They call upon the European Commission and the National Coordinators, supported by the Danube Strategy Point, to provide an effective coordination and facilitate communication and information exchange with organisations responsible for the management of the different EU funds and programmes to the benefit of all EUSDR actors, using also synergies with other regional agreements. In this respect, Ministers highlighted the increasing cooperation between the Monitoring Committee of the Danube Transnational Programme and the EUSDR governance structures. This kind of cooperation should also be explored and appropriately developed in relation to country-specific Operational Programmes.

Ministers highlighted possible options that could further facilitate the embedding of the EUSDR into the 2014 – 2020 ESIF Operational and Cooperation Programmes and the equivalent instruments for non-EU countries where appropriate and within the scope and provisions of the existing Regulations and Operational and Cooperation Programmes. Ministers took note of pilot exercises in this field already undertaken by certain countries in cooperation with the European Commission.

Ministers stressed the importance of the ongoing exchange of information about successfully implemented mechanisms and good practices of the smart use of various regional, national and EU funding possibilities for relevant EUSDR projects. In this regard, they agreed to take further steps to:

- **Improve the exchange of information:** Transparent and timely communication and exchange of information between the actors managing the ESIF Programmes and the equivalent instruments for non-EU countries, and those in charge of the EUSDR implementation (National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators, Steering Group Members) is vital in building trust and represents a basis for new partnerships and also more effective cooperation. In order to create synergies between financed projects and that they build upon each other, it is necessary to ensure exchange of information on projects financed in different countries and from different instruments. In this respect, the permanent strategic advisory role of the European Commission is crucial.
- **Enhance coordination:** Coordination between the relevant ESIF Operational and Cooperation Programmes and the equivalent instruments for non-EU countries and EUSDR actors is of essential importance. EUSDR actors have an overview of the targets of the Strategy and may advise on projects contributing to the

achievement of these targets. Where appropriate Managing Authorities, National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators and Steering Group Members should identify ways to enable ongoing coordination, e.g. by involving them into Monitoring Committees, by setting up dedicated coordination meetings or by using synergies with existing mechanisms. National coordination mechanisms are crucial in this respect and have to take the respective context into consideration. The European Commission and the Danube Strategy Point should play an active role in supporting this coordination and cooperation processes.

- **Streamline project selection:** Within the applicable legal framework and where appropriate, the 2014-20 ESIF Programmes can use part of the funds to co-finance actions or projects of macro-regional scope and interest (e.g. by stimulating the inclusion of a specific work package for cooperation activities). Where appropriate, Managing Authorities and Monitoring Committees should, in cooperation with the relevant EUSDR actors, develop and apply specific project selection criteria recognising the added value of macro-regional projects and their contribution to the EUSDR Priority Areas and targets. Furthermore, appropriate calls may foresee – inter alia – the allocation of bonus points to projects contributing to the implementation of the EUSDR targets and actions.
- **Consider EUSDR related calls:** Ministers take note of examples of Operational Programmes which have ear-marked a certain percentage of their funds for actions which may have a macro-regional impact. Where relevant, such calls aim at allocating funds in a well-targeted manner through specific calls for EUSDR projects within Priority Axis of Operational Programmes or to a duly justified limited geographical perimeter.
- **Facilitate exchange of experience and development of joint solutions within the Danube Region:** There are different options for programmes and EUSDR actors to share experiences and to jointly develop new solutions for a better administration and use of funds. In this respect, the new Interreg Europe Programme (former INTERREG IV C), which is mainly targeted at Managing Authorities, helps to enhance the implementation of regional development policies and programmes.

In conclusion, Ministers called upon all interested parties to join efforts and continue to ensure progress in the implementation process of the EUSDR by identifying and promoting suitable projects that can add value for the benefit of the inhabitants of the Danube Region.