

OPENING SESSION – Ruse Conference

- (1) The Mayor of Ruse, Mr Yotov opened the conference. He noted the role of Ruse as a leader in the region, and its aim with its Romanian neighbours to change the image of the region.
- (2) The Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Mr Borisov, also welcomed all participants and underlined the support of Bulgaria to the Strategy. He recalled the political declaration made at Budapest on February 25, when all countries committed themselves at the highest level. The Danube links Bulgaria to friends, and they must communicate daily. They need to work together to accelerate socio-economic development, to renovate infrastructure, and to eliminate bottlenecks, for example by building a second bridge across the Danube river which forms so much of the border with Romania.
- (3) The European Commissioner for Regional Policy, Mr Hahn, outlined the importance of the Strategy as an instrument to develop the whole basin region. He thanked Bulgaria for being at the heart of an initiative that is rooted in European values, in a region with much diversity but also with common objectives in a reunited Europe. He proposed a Danube strategy that delivers results because it has found *a new way of working* to unlock new forms of cooperation. The consultation process has produced a wealth of ideas for concrete projects in a wide variety of sectors. For example, the region wants improved connectivity – to the benefit of Europe as a whole. However, work has often been stymied by lack of funds or political will. The task is to find a structure that overcomes such problems. The aim is to establish a structure that ensures ownership of those involved, and we must provide the region with the capacity to act. The Danube strategy should be designed to be driven from the bottom up. We need to establish a management system to marry political coordination at a European level to implementation at a local level. The Danube should draw on the experience of the Baltic Sea strategy, centred on an Action Plan, with clear responsibilities identified. The role of the Commission is not to implement the Strategy – that is for the region – but to help "keep the ball rolling" and facilitate agreements when necessary. Technical assistance can offer support like training, and help in developing information systems for management of EU funds. We also support policies to avoid high staff turnover. And, we must use the Danube strategy to spread expertise to the candidate countries too. Overall, there is € 100 billion for regional development. We can use this by aligning programmes to the objectives of the Strategy. This is possible even in the current financial period. Commissioner Hahn concluded by saying he was convinced that the Danube Strategy will contribute to spreading security and prosperity to Europeans wherever they live in the Danube region. This is not because "*I am not an optimist*" he said, but because "*I am determined*" as Robert Schuman would have put it.
- (4) The Minister of Regional Development and Public Works in Bulgaria, Mr Plevneliev, sees the river as a historical driver of development in Bulgaria. Until the mid-twentieth century, it had been perceived and used as a corridor to the rest of Europe. More recently, it had been a barrier, but now it could serve again to open up the region. As well as supporting the three pillars, Bulgaria also saw a need to develop urban centres, technoparks, clusters and tourism together by joint work.
- (5) MEP Mrs Hyusmenova, Vice-Chair of the Regional Affairs Committee, sees the Strategy as a means to accelerate socio-economic cohesion. It was important to link the EU 2020 initiative to the work, and indeed 2020 itself could be a key year to reach objectives in the Danube region.
- (6) Mr Petru, Member of the Romanian Parliament, underlined the need for projects with real social impact. The Strategy could also promote competitiveness by addressing weaknesses in the Region. It needed resources, planning and coordination. The European Commission should monitor progress, and report regularly to the European Parliament and to national parliaments.

CLOSING SESSION

- (1) Mr Stoilov, Governor of Ruse District, began the concluding session by underlining that instruments such as the territorial cooperation programme between Romania and Bulgaria made everyone think more macro-regionally. It had lessons for the Strategy. It was also crucial to involve civil society.
- (2) Mr Donchev, Minister for EU Funds in Bulgaria, stated that Bulgaria sees "coordination solutions" as vital for more effective use of resources. These must be anchored in good planning. $1+1=2.5$ if we are smart. We must use the Baltic experience. The territorial cooperation transnational (B) strand should be the base.
- (3) Mr Barabas, Member of the European Economic & Social Committee from Hungary, asked that the Strategy be citizen-friendly. The EESC was generally positive, but it should not be top-down. Civil society must be involved, but capacity differed between countries. A strong Action Plan was vital, with good focus. Despite reservations, we must be committed and optimistic.
- (4) Mr Palma Andres, Director of Regional Policy, European Commission was struck by the commitment of the participants, and their desire to make this strategy work. All stakeholder voices had the opportunity to be heard. We now have the job of building a framework to put ideas expressed into order. This has progressed substantially through this conference. This is essentially Danube work, but can be inspired by our work in the Baltic Region. From the discussions, he retained particularly the following points:
 - We need to work in partnership
 - Our principal aim should be to align policy, instruments and funding
 - Priorities should have a genuine Danube dimension
 - We must be inclusive of non-EU countries but recognise the differences
 - Political rhetoric must be matched by operational decisions
 - An annual stakeholders forum could be a good idea
 - The structure of a European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) at the heart of the work should be further explored
 - Finally, he is looking at how the strategy must re-enforce the work on EU 2020.
- (5) To close the Conference, Mr Iliescu, Mayor of Giurgiu, invited all participants to come across the river to visit his home town the next day. Visits of the longest steel bridge in Europe and of the port would be highlights. The port and all shipping links needed to be modernised, with multi-modal options. Other links between Romania and Bulgaria were vital, since both sides faced similar challenges. This was the inspiration for the Ruse-Giurgiu Euroregion, which is now an active member of the Association of European Border Regions. Other cooperation included the universities. Overall, there are high expectations of the Strategy.

Colin Wolfe