

EU Strategy for the Danube Region / Conference in Ruse (BG) ***Ruse (BG)***

Workshop (1) Implementing the Danube Strategy – macro-regional mechanisms and structures for implementation and monitoring

CONCLUSIONS: Rapporteur: Johann SOLLGRUBER

Presentations were made by David Sweet, Adviser to the Director-General, DG Regional Policy, R. Mafael, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Germany, P. Weller, International Convention for the Protection of the Danube River, P. Langer, Council of Danube Regions and Cities, and G. Žalac, Vukovar-Srijem County, Croatia.

Ms. Charlina Vitcheva, Director, DG Regional Policy, underlined that there was strong support for the Commission to design and draw up the EU strategy. We need to build on the existing experience with the implementation structure of the Baltic Sea but take into consideration the specific features of the Danube region.

David Sweet, Adviser to the Director-General, DG Regional Policy reiterated the characteristics of macro-regional strategies: multi-sectoral, integrated and long-term. They are also multi-level, consensus-based and decentralised. The Commission has to ensure compatibility with EU policies. Partners in the region have to agree to implement it. No one is compelled to participate. The role of Priority Area coordinators and Flagship Project Leaders was illustrated. The High Level group is chaired the EC, the Committee of Regions and the European Bank of Investment. It reviews the reports, progress made and reviews changes if necessary. An annual gathering of stakeholders is envisaged. The National Contact Points channel information. Managing Authorities review alignment with structural funds' programmes. Partnership of all stakeholders is crucial.

Rolf Mafael, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Germany (Danube National Contact Point) enriched the debate based on his dual experience both in the Baltic area and the designing of the Danube strategy. He underlined that good governance required the political will of all parties concerned and disputes need to be settled in agreement with all. The Danube implementation structure needs to remain slim and sound. Key to success will be the mobilisation of existing structures and resources. Danube area is different in terms of the wide range of various levels of administrative capacity and experiences in handling complex challenges.

The presentations of MM Mafael and Langer were particularly helpful as they complemented the more general approach with detailed and concrete examples of the role of Priority Area coordinators and Flagship Project Leaders (Mafael) and that of an international body already established in the area (Langer). Peter Langer, spokesperson for the Council of Danube Regions and Cities, presented the EGTC and the network of Danube cities reaching from Ulm to Vidin as an example of successful cooperation.

Philip Weller, Executive Director, International Convention for the Protection of the Danube River described the recent approval of the Water Management Plan as a breakthrough. Funding in a series of Member States is built on EU co-finance stemming from Structural Funds. The urgency prompted rapid reaction. The agreed plan will be translated in a coordinated way in national action plans. The realisation of this project could emerge as one of the actions in the EU- Danube strategy.

Gabrijela Žalac, Head of International Cooperation Department, Vukovar-Srijem County, Croatia, proved to the audience that Croatia and its counties are on a good path to manage both accession preparation and active contribution to the designing of the Danube strategy at the same time.

The mayor of Vidin, **Mr. Rumen Angelov Vidov**, gave a presentation on a futuristic Danube Park project to be realised at the river basin at the sight where Danube Bridge II Vidin – Kalafat, connecting Bulgaria and Romania, will be constructed.

The discussion drew comments from officials, members of NGOs, representatives from the private sector and academics and highlighted, among other issues, the need to draw business into the strategy more explicitly; the importance of reaching out to NGOs (as opposed to the Baltic Sea Region where they are much more developed and confident). There was also interest in the areas of indicators, monitoring and evaluation but it was agreed that without clear knowledge of the scale and nature of the inputs to the strategy it would be difficult to evaluate the outputs. Nonetheless, this is an area which will need close attention.

The workshop identified a large scale of interest from a number of participants in the possibility of using EGTC as a way of enabling cross-border initiatives.

Other points discussed were pooling of funding and the active participation of managing authorities and the inclusion of existing initiatives. They have done useful work and will complement each other through the strategy. It will be the vital role of the Commission to avoid that counteracting measures will be implemented.

Overall, the speakers concluded that the strategy must be perceived bottom up and inclusive in order to succeed. We need to include civil society at an early stage. The Adviser to the Director General spelt out that we need to be more proactive in terms of inclusion of civil society already in the phase of drawing up the strategy. This would be crucial in order to ensure that the strategy will be backed in its implementation phase later on.