



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Celebrating the first year of the EU Strategy for the Danube region

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

First Annual Forum of the EU Danube Strategy/Regensburg
27 November 2012

Dear Ministers, Dear Emilia,

Mr Mayor,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear Danube colleagues,

Welcome to the first Danube Forum and let me warmly thank our hosts in Bavaria!

We are gathered here today and tomorrow to mark a very important step in the implementation of the Danube Strategy – for the first time we will review progress and achievements and make plans for the future, crucially in relation to the next period of cohesion policy.

The river that runs through this region, the Danube, may not be the world's longest river but it is the most international. Our strategy offers hope and potential to all of Europe - this Danube macro region is a showcase to implement our vision. We must pool our efforts to make sure that we can offer the 100 million people who live here new perspectives for the future.

We all have a political and moral obligation to ensure that the people who live here know there is a future for their children in the place they were born.

I can say that we have done far better over the last year than I could have imagined. We are already implementing projects, this is not just a question of talking but of making something tangible.

Let's now turn to today's and tomorrow's work.

The Danube Strategy has been adopted 18 months ago. This is both a short and a long period.

A short period, because we have set ourselves ambitious targets which of course will take time to become reality.

A long period, because many stakeholders are keen to see concrete results and projects on the ground.

What have we achieved so far?

First, I can say with confidence that we have now put in place a solid platform for long-term cooperation. This is a big step forward for those who know how patchy and fragmented cooperation was only two years ago. The early political commitment from 2008 has not waned. I want to take this opportunity to thank Ministers across the Region for their continued support and dedication.

We also have better cooperation at operational level in the 11 Priority Areas. There is now a clear framework for all the countries of the Danube to tackle shared issues and exploit common potential together.

Secondly, we have a number of very concrete projects which have started in many priority areas.

There is very visible progress on transport. I personally crossed the second Danube Bridge between Bulgaria and Romania last October. We are now very close to removing an important bottleneck on Corridor IV.

Last June, the Danube Region Ministers of Transport adopted a declaration on the maintenance of the Danube waterway, committing themselves to concrete measures to maintain good navigation conditions as much as possible.

In the field of business too, we have seen progress. The Danube Business Forum has become reality. The first forum in November 2011 brought together 300 SMEs and over 200 business-to-business meetings took place. The second forum has just taken place two weeks ago and a third one is already scheduled for 2013.

I know that things have also happened in police cooperation, in branding the Danube as a tourism destination or in protecting the highly symbolic Danube sturgeon.

While we can be happy with those developments, we also have to take a close look at areas where we have not progressed as well as we would all have wanted.

My main concern relates to the sometimes patchy participation in the coordination work and the too frequent changes in personnel. For us to succeed, we do need to see strong participation from all countries in all priority areas.

We cannot approach the Danube Strategy as if it were a menu of priorities from which each of us can choose to work on just one or two. The whole point of the strategy is to design and implement common policies, shared by all.

Of course some priorities benefit from an already established cooperation framework. For those, our work is about consolidation and deepening of cooperation. For other priorities we have started from a blank sheet of paper 18 months ago. Here, we must invest in establishing strong links and effective coordination mechanisms.

I am sure we will have the opportunity to examine this further during our exchanges today and tomorrow.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have come a long way in just 18 months but we are still only in the first stretch of a long marathon.

I urge you to take the opportunity of this forum to discuss honestly and openly what needs improving in the way we operate and what we can learn from our first experiences. We also have with us colleagues from the Baltic Sea Strategy. Let's use their presence to gain some wisdom about macro-regional strategy implementation....

To stimulate the discussion a reflection paper has been prepared and distributed in advance. This is a useful starting point for our debate.

Key questions we need to reflect upon include how we deepen even further our cooperation mechanisms and how we integrate the Danube dimension more systematically in our policies at regional, national and EU levels.

We also need to come up with some proposals to ensure we make the most of the next programming period of Cohesion Policy. 2013 will be a key year in this process as negotiations start on Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes.

Finally, I want to make sure we do not lose track of the important targets we have agreed upon. Let's remember that our success will be measured against these targets – they should help us focus and concentrate on what we have all agreed is essential for the Danube Region in the coming years.

A final word to warmly thank our hosts. The Bavarian authorities have been highly supportive of the Strategy from the outset. I want to personally thank them, as well as the Federal Government of Germany, for helping us organise this first Danube Forum. Thank you also to the city authorities making it possible to host this event in the historical city of Regensburg, just a stone's throw away from the Danube.

I wish you all fruitful and constructive exchanges and I look forward to our conclusions tomorrow.