

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region Croatian Presidency Programme for 2020

I. Introduction

Macro-regional strategies represent a political framework that allows countries in the same region to make better use of joint development potential. Through territorial cooperation at the macro-regional level, the participating countries coordinate and achieve their national interests, producing a greater and faster effect in comparison to acting independently in areas of regional significance. An EU non-member state's equal participation in macro-regional cooperation significantly contributes to the processes of European integration and sharing of useful knowledge and experience.

The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) provides numerous opportunities for economic, social and cultural cooperation among countries along the Danube, a river with the most prominent international character in the world, a significant international hydro-biological pool, and a homogenous ecological corridor. Achieving the common goals of the Strategy's participating countries, finding sustainable solutions, and continually raising quality at all levels of management are added values with which the EUSDR (Danube Strategy) contributes to the development of a prosperous Danube region.

In the post-2020 period, macro-regional strategies, including the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, will largely depend on the way in which European Union policies are implemented. In this extremely demanding process, it is important to raise the awareness of political and other relevant actors of the importance and potential of macro-regional cooperation and its added value for efficient and secure investments in the region. The Croatian Programme for the Presidency of the EU for the Danube Region prioritizes areas crucial to the sustainability of macro-regional cooperation and its importance for further development of the Danube Region.

II. Croatian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (Danube Strategy)

In November 2019, Croatia is taking over the one-year presidency of the Danube Strategy, while on 1 January 2020 it will assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the first time.

In this dynamic period for the European Union, through the Presidency of the Danube Strategy, Croatia wishes to contribute to the development of European regions as proven catalysts for growth and added value of European cooperation. Croatia places regional development at the centre of its presidency of the Danube Strategy, as a precondition for economic growth, sustainable social development and strengthening of territorial cohesion. It is also an opportunity to strengthen the role of macro-regional strategies in the Cohesion Policy of the European Union.

"The Danube Strategy – 10 Years Later" is the central theme of the Croatian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. The main goal is to identify the role of macro-regional cooperation, to evaluate the achieved results and to determine the future direction of its development. The Croatian Presidency of the Danube Strategy will provide an opportunity to strengthen the affirmation of macro-regional strategies and territorial cooperation in the Republic of Croatia, the Danube Region and the European Union.

Political Objectives of the Presidency

1. Strengthening the role of regional development

Regional development is one of the most important policies of the European Union, one to which it allocates a third of its budget. Macro-regional strategies as instruments for stimulating regional development and implementing European regional development policies are still insufficiently recognized. The reports on the implementation of macro-regional strategies indicate that there is an evident lack of political will and support in affirming macro-regional strategies as an important factor for regional development. During its presidency, Croatia wishes to discuss the links between national development documents and the priorities of macro-regional strategies in the context of programming the financial period 2021-2027. It is therefore necessary to consider the cause-and-effect links between development measures and the instruments defined at the national level and the goals and priorities at the macro-regional level. As a participant country of two macro-regional strategies - the Danube and Adriatic-Ionian Strategies - Croatia will also pay special attention to horizontal links with other macro-regional strategies, their visibility and the use of good practices necessary for achieving synergy and complementarity.

2. Creating synergies between macro-regional strategies and the Cohesion Policy

Implementation of the Cohesion Policy includes efforts to capitalize on the advantages of each country in order to create an environment conducive to its growth and development, and to realize the full potential of EU funds and national investments. As these effects do not stop at territorial borders, it is necessary to better connect countries and to foster the kind of cooperation that best contributes to the sustainable and balanced development of the entire territory of the European Union.

Macro-regional strategies enable multi-sectoral, multi-level and multi-national governance that creates added value to the Cohesion Policy. Through the strengthening of the territorial approach, knowledge about certain areas is improved in order to properly steer their development.

During its presidency, Croatia will advocate the promotion of a functional approach to the integrated development of the participating countries in order to achieve greater synergies between macro-regional strategies and the Cohesion Policy. The new multi-annual financial framework for 2021–2027 will be planned to support policies tailored to local/regional needs, multi-level governance and the better association of participating countries by encouraging cooperation. The Croatian presidency will advocate the concept of macro-regional cooperation based on more efficient use of financial instruments and existing sources of funding. Participating countries will be encouraged to consider how and to what extent macro-regional strategies can bring added value to the Cohesion Policy.

3. Cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans

Given that macro-regional strategies set the cooperation framework between EU member states and non-EU member states, building on harmonized actions and partnership relations, they also represent a European integration model for non-EU member states. Bearing in mind the diverse issues in the region of South-East Europe, Croatia believes that continuity in supporting EU integration processes for the countries of the Western Balkans greatly contributes to security and stability, as well as to the prosperity of the entire region. Through its presidency of the EUSDR, Croatia wishes to continue its efforts on connecting the countries in the region and supporting their European integration processes, whilst placing enlargement policy high on the agenda during its presidency of the Council of the EU.

EUSDR Presidency Thematic Priorities

1. Cooperation between scientific institutions and economic stakeholders

New technologies and digitalization stand at the core of the thematic priority dedicated to cooperation between scientific institutions and the economy, acting as catalysts for the development and adaptation of the educational system to market needs.

The transfer of knowledge and new technologies have an undeniable role in economic growth and strengthening competitiveness. In this sense, transnational cooperation through macro-regional strategies represents a valuable test site for establishing partnerships in the transfer and upgrading of innovative solutions.

2. Environmental protection and sustainable economic development

A protected and well-preserved natural environment will ensure stable fundamental values and development potentials for the Danube region in the future. It will also affirm the region's position in the European setting as an area with a highly developed awareness of the importance of natural heritage preservation, which if used in a well-thought-out and sustainable way, opens up multiple development paths.

The protection and preservation of biodiversity at the regional and local levels, education, intersectoral cooperation and public inclusion greatly contribute to raising awareness of the importance of the region's preservation in all spheres of political, economic and social acting. Given that nature conservation contributes to ensuring all the functionalities necessary for human life and the economic development of regions, it is necessary to encourage a more systematic cooperation between macro-regional strategies in order to achieve the necessary synergy and contribute to the protection and promotion of biodiversity, primarily through better ecosystem connectivity.

The final goal is to preserve existing bio- and geological diversity, revive a part of lost species and natural habitats, where this is possible and justified, and to develop an adequate system for their valorization and preservation.

3. Inland waterways, tourism and smart villages

In the context of inland waterway connections within the Danube region, the following priorities have been identified: technological development and innovations in inland navigation, and the development of waterways, river ports, shipping and inland navigation companies. The improvement of navigability conditions on the Sava and Drava rivers is an additional priority for Croatia, and is the basic prerequisite for water mobility improvement. In the tourism sector, priority is given to the development of all forms of sustainable rural tourism as a potential new target area, where a special emphasis has been placed on sustainable use of geothermal water resources, which are currently an unused potential. Through the concept of smart villages, the following areas of intervention will be supported: the use of digital technologies, social innovations, the bio-economy, the competitive green village economy, reusable energy resources, and mobility.

4. Civil protection

Within the framework of the Danube Strategy, Croatia puts emphasis on environmental protection through the prevention of natural and other disasters, whilst attaching great importance to civil protection. Building on previous experiences, Croatia considers that further investments in multidisciplinary teams of experts are necessary in order to ensure the continuity of good practices among countries.

5. Regional and local government capacity building

The multi-level governance principle in Croatia ensures compliance with subsidiarity and shared responsibility principles in decision-making processes at respective governance levels. Experience from local level participation in macro-regional strategies bears witness to the absolute necessity for the consequent implementation of the multi-level governance principle as a core prerequisite for the successful achievement of EU goals in the field of balanced and sustainable regional development. During its EUSDR presidency, Croatia will advocate strengthening ties between different levels of governance, both horizontally and vertically, as well as the better visibility and influence of the multi-level governance principle.

III. Conclusion

Through its EUSDR presidency programme, Croatia wishes to give firm support to the Strategy's Action Plan. However, in order to achieve the planned impact through the Strategy and its Action Plan, the participating countries should provide stronger political and concrete financial support. Moreover, the EUSDR governance structure should also be strengthened to ensure its impact at all levels.

The central theme of the Croatian Presidency of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, "**The Danube Strategy – 10 Years Later**", provides opportunities for the communication and exchange of experience between member states in different fields of cooperation. Partnership and cooperation are the deciding factors in finding the answers to current challenges in the region connected by the River Danube. During its one-year presidency, Croatia wishes to provide opportunities and possibilities to deepen and strengthen cooperation within the framework of the Danube macro-regional strategy, as well as define key guidelines to determine and improve its future development.