

## A Brief History of Participation in the EUSDR and the Danube Civil Society Forum

From the Danube Basin NGO Project to the Danube Civil Society Forum

In 2009 civil society learned about plans in the EU to introduce a second macro-regional strategy in the Danube region. At the first conference on the Strategy 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2010 and in the wake of the proceedings it became clear that participative elements and the inclusion of civil society and structural elements of a participative approach were more or less missing in the concept.

Foster Europe held intense talks with the chair of the REGI committee of the European Parliament MEP Danuta Hübner and Dirk Ahner, Director General of the DG REGIO and his team on the issue of strengthening civil society inclusion and structural participation. An agreement was reached that the future strategy should have stronger involvement of civil society and participative elements.

In February 2010 Foster Europe published its *Statement on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region* ([http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/archive/consultation/danube/doc/contrib/eur\\_fostereurope\\_statement.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/archive/consultation/danube/doc/contrib/eur_fostereurope_statement.pdf)) calling for “an additional pillar of the civil society participation

*”to the three then scheduled pillars of the EUSDR. Foster Europe demanded “structural anchoring of the civil society within the scope of the consultations for development and execution of the Danube Strategy. Simultaneously, the process of forming an opinion and preparation of a plan of action has to be designed that way that the wishes, concerns and demands of the civil society are still included after June 2010 and fully considered in the design of the strategy.*

*The civil society participation and structure must be designed in an inclusive manner. It is to include all states and regions involved on a wide basis, and at the same time be linked and organised at the international level. An active and vital civil society structure requires the direct contact between the actors.*

*Regular meetings and discussions, which can also be attended by local organisations and groups and such ones equipped with tight finances, are a prerequisite for the development of a productive and creative interaction of the civil society in the Danube river basin.”*

Based on this the *Danube Basin NGO Project* was launched, again in close coordination with EC (DG Regio and EP (REGI committee). The *Danube Basin NGO Project* aimed at informing civil society and academia on the consultation and planning process for the future EUSDR and tried to reach the grass-root level in the Danube region. While the official EU communication was limited to English the multilingual website (en, hr, sk, bg, ro, srb, Romani) was launched to inform and mobilise civil society and academia in the entire region aiming at all levels of civil society. The website included a detailed questionnaire of the capacities, state and field of work, needs, desires, regional national and international links and networks of the civil society organisation. The link to the website was mailed to more than 3.000 email addresses obtained among others from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR) the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU (FRA), NGO networks and communities in the Danube region.

In a second step a consultation process on how to shape civil society inclusion and participation in the future EUSDR was launched with more than 80 NGOs that joined the process. This group decided to discuss as NGO key-actors group in a sequence of four meetings held 2010 in Sremska Kamenica (SRB), Belgrade (SRB), and Eisenstadt (A), the next steps. 28 June 2010 the *Guiding Principles of Civil Society in the Danube Basin* [Guiding Principles of Civil Society in the Danube Basin](#) (here you find a slightly adopted version by the DCSF from 2016) were adopted at the concluding meeting in Eisenstadt.

On the basis of this *Eisenstadt Principles* and again in close coordination with the EG, the DG Regio and the member states involved the network formed over the past month pushed the process further. of founding the Danube Civil Society Forum. Main aim was to anchor the civil society participation in the upcoming *Action Plan* of the EUSDR. The document launched 8 December 2010 included the Action:

“Action - “To establish a Danube Civil Society Forum” – promoting the idea of a Danube Civil Forum as a pillar of civil society participation in the Strategy. Such projects could offer experience within the field of civil society-state dialogue as well as cross-border and transnational networking. “To establish a Danube Civil Society Forum” – promoting the idea of a Danube Civil Forum as a pillar of civil society participation in the Strategy.”

Based on this clear task formulated in the EUSDR Action Plan the network started the process of founding the Danube Civil Society Forum. This took place at the first open General Assembly of the Danube Civil Society Forum in Eisenstaedt, 30 June-1 July 2011. This open General Assembly was joined by more than 110 representatives from the entire Danube region, from civil society, the European parliament, the EC, cities and regions as well as from academia. The key-notes were given by MEP Danuta Hübner, former EU Commissioner for Regional Policy and Morten Kjærum, Director General EU Fundamental Rights Agency. The EU Commission DG Regio was represented by Ms Kadri Uustal, then Advisor to the Director General, DG REGIO and Ms Adriana Kiss-Davies. On 1. July H. E. Szalay-Bobrovniczky, Ambassador of Hungary addressed the General Assembly on behalf of the Republic of Hungary, holding its first Presidency in the EU and inaugurating the EUSDR at the same day at the Danube summit in Budapest.

Without the strong support from the DG Regio and the REGI Committee of the EP this process would not have been accomplished in such a concise process. The DCSF has not received any financial support from the DG Regio or the EP.

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