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Position Paper on
Civil Society Participation
and the
EU Strategy for the Danube Region

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Contents

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region, EUSDR	3
Schedule	3
Context	3
The (imaginary) region and the people	5
Breaks, conflicts	5
...and paradoxes	6
The Angern syndrome	7
The European peace project	9
The European river: traditional, visionary and full of hope	10
Further cross-regional strategies of the EU	10
The civil society participation in the EUSDR	12
An additional pillar of the civil society participation	13
Danube Basin Civil Society Network Project	14
Danube Civil Forum - A Network of Networks	14



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The EU Strategy for the Danube Region, EUSDR

At the beginning of 2010, the European Commission started to develop a strategy for the Danube region. This strategy as a cross-section subject is to bring together various resorts of the Commission and their policies (integrated approach), and in that focus on selected application areas of central interest, which are assumed to concern the entire greater area in one way or another (focussed approach).

So far, a three pillar model was suggested by the Commission:

- "Environment" with the topics of water (flood control) and quality management (maintenance and support of biodiversity, availability of sustainable energy),
- "Connectivity" with the topics of infrastructure development in the areas of transport (water, rail, road), energy and information technology,
- "Socio-economic integration" with the topics of intensification of the interactions and economic integration of the citizens, maintenance, development and use of the cultural diversity of the region.

Schedule

Until the end of June, the Commission wants to consult with actors and stakeholders considered significant in the greater Danube river basin area. Within the scope of these consultations, suggestions for projects and concrete measures are to be collected already.

During summer 2010, the Commission wants to prepare a plan of action, which subsequently enables the launch of the EU Strategy for the Danube region within the scope of the Hungarian Presidency of the European Council in 2011.

Context

The project for the development of the EUSDR is closely associated with the development history of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region, the [Plan of Action Baltic Sea Region](#) of which was adopted on 10th June 2009.

The main objective of the Baltic Sea Strategy is a more intensive and coherent cooperation of the Baltic region states (8 EU member states plus the Russian Federation).



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4 main subjects were jointly fixed. The region is to become

- ecological and sustainable (e.g. by keeping the Baltic Sea clean/waste water management),
- wealthy (e.g. by innovation and investment support for SMEs),
- accessible and attractive (e.g. with a better infrastructure), as well as
- safe (e.g. with a better crisis and emergency management).

A total of 15 fields of action were deviated therefrom in the "plan of action" as well as 80 projects interlinked therewith identified.

Simultaneously, the experience with the large area policies of the EU concerning the Euro-Mediterranean Basin (Barcelona Process since 1997 and Union for the Mediterranean Sea since 2008) and the Eastern Partnership since 2004/9 within the scope of the European Neighbourhood Policy forms a certain template for the EUSDR.



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The (imaginary) region and the people

The geographical area, which is to be covered by the concept of the Danube Strategy to be developed, could hardly be more varied or more heterogeneous. The Danube region comprises the highest developed and most productive regions of the EU with the highest creation of value and the highest wealth as well as the regions with the least development and productivity and the lowest available income (BIP/inhabitant 2006: Upper Bavaria 39,700 EUR, north-eastern region of Romania 5,800 EUR) at the same time.

The Danube region comprises highly productive ecological agricultures (Burgenland, Austria) as well as the remainders of a collapsed agricultural economy (25-30 % fallow land in parts of Romania).

The Danube region comprises boom-town areas (Bratislava, Budapest) and areas with the highest degree of emigration and demographic decline.

The region is therefore characterised by a huge gap in prosperity and income, infrastructure and transport connections, economic structure and economic growth.

Currently, the Danube region as one political, cultural and economic entity still is a vision. This entity cannot be postulated for the member states of the Union, and even less for the group of states currently standing outside the Union.

Breaks, conflicts ...

The region, for which the Danube Strategy of the European Union is to be developed, is not only geographically very heterogeneous and diversified.

The high density of different cultures and their achievements characterises the Danube region just as the dichotomies of poor and rich, productive and poorly developed areas and structures. Simultaneously, the Danube region, differing from e.g. the Rhine region (Switzerland, France, Germany, Benelux), is characterised by varied cultural breaks and apparent contradictions, which caused diverse conflicts in this region since the partition of the Roman Empire in 395.

This region was the scene for the partition of the Roman Empire into a western and an eastern part. An administrative separation, which was the starting point of the separation of orient and occident, Greek and Latin world. This gap was repeated and culturally solidified by the Great Schism of 1054, which at least partially reproduced the demarcation of 395.



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Since the 13th century, the Danube region again has been the scene of a dispute over several hundred years between European powers and the Ottoman Empire. This conflict not only determined the relation of Austria and Hungary to this region, but also is a central element of the national identity in Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania, which partially only at the end of the 19th century were able to achieve their national sovereignty in the conflict with the Ottoman Empire or the Habsburg quest for supremacy.

The repression of the Ottoman Empire under Habsburg control solidified this conflict in the Austrian identity with the key dates of the two sieges of Vienna by Ottoman armies in 1529 and 1683. Over centuries, the region of the Danube river basin was crossed by a military border, the symbol of the Habsburg-Ottoman antagonism. This conflict also was and still is interpreted as the conflict of two world religions between Christianity and Islam. Additionally, due to the new Habsburg hegemony, the region increasingly became the target of a quasi-colonial policy, which cumulated in the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908.

The Danube region is characterised by a number of antagonisms. These mostly are reactions to hegemony ambitions of one nation in the region, have most different causes, and have their origins in different eras. Each of these antagonisms also was the reason for wars. Here, the Austrian-Serbian conflict, the Austrian-Hungarian conflict, the conflicts of the neighbours with the Hungarian cultural hegemony in the 19th century as well as the Balkan Wars, which quickly changed from a "fight for independence" to a struggle for regional dominance, have to be mentioned.

In the 20th century, the Danube region became the target of the German NS super power policy and had to suffer under German occupation and the expulsion and murder of millions of civilians in 1941-1947.

From 1947 on, the Iron Curtain then also split the greater Danube region as part of the east-west partition of Europe between 1947 and 1989. The Balkans were additionally torn apart by the emergence of new extreme nationalism and the wars resulting therefrom as well as in the Ex-Yugoslavia conflicts, which again harmed millions of people and moulded their perception of their neighbours as well as their political and societal self.

... and paradoxes

Beside these multiple breaks in the (cultural) history of the Danube region, this macro-region is additionally characterised by a number of paradoxes, which alienate the citizens from the commonness of the Danube region and the European idea.



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Thus, hardly any country benefited politically, economically and culturally as much from the fall of the Iron Curtain, its accession to the EU and the eastern European expansions of the EU in 2004 and 2007 as Austria. However, following the initial above-average consent to the EU, the attitude of the public in Austria turned into the opposite. The majority of the Austrians now has a negative attitude towards the EU and rejected the expansion in the Danube region, the economic penetration and integration of which substantially contributed to the Austrian wealth of the past 15-20 years.

These breaks and paradoxes are anchored in the heads of the citizens, but they also result in quite real facts. The fact that the river Danube is not spanned by bridges over a length of almost 400 km (Iron Gate II km 863 to km 488.7 Girju-Ruse), is an obvious expression of this attitude.

The Angern syndrome

This circumstance of the broken (off) connections in the Danube region is not least based on the will of the citizens, which refuse an increased connectivity and ability for communication in the Danube region and face it with fear.

Angern an der March is a small border town in Lower Austria directly opposite Záhorská Ves (*Ungeraiden, Magyarfalu*), Slovakia. Today, a ferry transports small trucks, passenger cars, motorbikes, bicycles and pedestrians every few minutes. If the ferry was a little longer, it could already serve as a bridge. But even the ferry service only started in 2000, and only with great difficulties.

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, the euphoria of the new Europe in Angern, on the Austrian side, was very limited. In a public opinion poll, 60 % voted against the erection of a bridge to their neighbours. The border and the break between east and west had long mutated into borders and breaks in the heads, which substantially contributed to the self-definition of the "own" and the "we".

Only a new vote in 2007 resulted in consent to a bridge with almost two thirds, but broad consent at the regulars' tables on the Austrian side is still sought in vain today.

The erection and overcoming of walls, just as the construction of bridges, is a process that starts in the heads and minds of people. And not everybody everywhere is ready for that. In Angern-Záhorská Ves, EU funds substantially contributed to the realisation of the bridge project. In 2010, 21 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the gate to a joint Europe opens between Angern and Záhorská Ves, too.



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When Angern and Záhorská Ves, which were separated and alienated from one another since 1945 only, developed such a syndrome already, how many more and even stronger breaks and vehement rejection of the direct neighbour have to be reckoned with in regions, which only recently fought bloody wars and experienced, practiced and suffered from mass expulsions?



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The European peace project

The European integration is, and that is frequently forgotten today, *the biggest European peace project*. This project started at the beginning of the 1950's in another large European region characterised by a river, the Rhine region. After centuries of conflict, French and Germans came together, accompanied and supported in their new effort by the Benelux states, which on their part had abolished conflicts and borders in a forward-looking manner.

We don't want to underestimate the role of the Cold War and the real or fictitious threat by the Soviet Block as a driving power of the Western European integration. Today, in the Danube region, we are in the lucky situation that we are not subject to any direct military threat. However, it was a deeply felt desire of the peoples of Western Europe to overcome the partition of the past centuries and two World Wars in a joint effort. Europe was perceived as modern, forward-looking, even visionary. The European integration in the West additionally benefited from the new mobility during the boom of the 1950's and 1960's, which for the first time enabled the people to travel through Europe on a large scale as civilians beyond the campaigns of the World Wars, too. This positive prevailing mood in the population was also able to overcome the worst crises of political integration ('empty chair' policy, 1965/66).

This euphoria for a unified Europe has meanwhile evaporated along the line of the former Iron Curtain and along the river Danube.

However, and even more so, it is the task of the states and peoples as well as the EU to work on the vision of the river Danube as a region of peace, law and democracy, and thus to open the door to prosperity and a sustained ecological development of the region.



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The European river: traditional, visionary and full of hope

The EUSDR confronts the old, conflict-laden imaginary regions and demarcations, which so far dominated the Danube river basin, with the vision of a new mental mapping, which wants to bring together the people and cultures in the Danube river basin in their diversity.

The project of the Danube Strategy is traditional as well as visionary and full of hope in equal measure.

Visionary, because the Union and its member states have started a process, which is designed to overcome these very old patterns of partitions and breaks in Europe.

Full of hope, because in doing so, a massive revolution is started in the Danube region, which is driven by many, most different motors. Starting point of the strategy probably was the Danube region of Baden-Württemberg. Here, it was possible to obtain support for the idea in Brussels and in the main cities of the member states and regions along the river Danube. The fact that the Foreign Ministries of Vienna and Bucharest also claim the "paternity" of the idea for themselves speaks in favour of the Danube Strategy.

Traditional is the approach to advance the unity in the Danube region via the economic development along the river. Since Jean Monet, this approach has repeatedly proved to be successful.

Certainly, the considerations 2010 are not stuck in the economic area. Forward-looking ecological planning is a central component of the strategy to come.

Further cross-regional strategies of the EU

The approach of a macro-regional strategy is still young. The Baltic Sea Strategy defined in 2009 does not enable a concluding assessment yet.

In view of their external relations, EU and civil society, however, have experience with their neighbourhood policies since 1995. Similar to the large area strategies, the neighbourhood policies ENP and Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean Sea served the stabilisation of the direct neighbourhood regions of the EU, the development of welfare and wealth, the reinforcement of democracy and rule of law, the launch of sustained ecological development as well as the protection of the diversified cultural values and their conveyance to the people in the region.



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In the large area policies, in particular the ENP and the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean Sea, which may serve as a template for the EUSDR, the participation of the civil societies has been given high priority. In both cases, the civil society dimensions are structurally anchored within the bigger political process, which, among others, becomes manifest in regular civil forums and an exchange between civil society and Ministers/EU Commission.



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The civil society participation in the EUSDR

For the development of the EU Strategy for the Danube region, an open and integrative stakeholder process was started, which theoretically is to enable all participants and interested parties in the Danube region to get involved in the development and later implementation of the EU Danube Strategy, and to be respectively heard and considered. We expressly welcome and support this approach.

The participation of the civil society in the EUSDR, however, has been too weak so far. As the experience of the 1st EU Conference on the Danube Strategy in Ulm showed, the largest groups of the civil society, in particular from the southern countries of the Danube river basin, were not able to participate in the conference. The programme of the conference and its workshops as well as the list of speakers likewise clearly reflected the too weak participation of the civil society.

Furthermore, the tight schedule of the EUSDR stakeholder process is a structural disadvantage for the civil society in general, and for the weaker and the more southern civil societies in particular.

The open consultation process recently started by the EU Commission though will considerably facilitate the possibilities for the expression of opinions for the civil society, however, due to the still insufficient publicity of the process, it cannot be assumed that with the consultation process, the lacking possibilities for participation of the less developed groups of the civil society can be sufficiently compensated. An essential obstacle is the lacking multilingualism of the consultation process, which assumes English language skills.

The very recent consultation process of the Commission for the EUSDR is in many of the affected states still entirely unknown and goes unnoticed by the media. The EU missions in the countries are hardly integrated into the work and cannot serve as effective multipliers.

The present schedule lists the consultations in Bulgaria and Romania at the end of the stakeholder process in May and June, so that a participation of the civil society there, if at all, is included into the discussion only very late. The non-participation of these groups in the Ulm Conference additionally intensifies this structural disadvantage.

Until the planned end of the stakeholder process in June 2010, large groups of the civil society of the Danube region will not have completed their internal opinion forming process yet. This not least due to the structural deficits stated by the EU in the areas of transnational exchange, infrastructure and communication paths, which the Danube Strategy rightly wants to eliminate.



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An additional pillar of the civil society participation

Therefore, Foster Europe demands 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.

Without the people of the Danube region it will be impossible to overcome the diversified breaks, gaps and paradoxes dividing and separating the region and keeping the people away from one another.

So far, the state actors have very much used the Danube Strategy to project their agendas, partially pursued for years already, into the new strategy. Deepening of the river Danube, river power stations, and the development of the infrastructure for shipping may have significance, however, they are everything but new.

The civil society participation is best able to integrate the urgently required and valuable creativity, vitality and innovative power of the population of the Danube river basin into the process.

The experience in particular in the Mediterranean region has shown that a well organised civil society dimension was frequently considerably better able to overcome the political crises, than this was achieved by the state actors.

At the same time, a strong civil society dimension is the best guarantee that the implementation of the strategy according to the specifications corresponds to good governance and a policy for the people of the Danube region.

The structurally anchored and self-organised participation of the civil society of the Danube river basin in the Danube Strategy strengthens the ownership in this new approach of the EU and is an effective multiplier of the targets and visions of a joint European Danube region.



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Danube Basin Civil Society Network Project

Foster Europe works in cooperation with partners of the Danube region for the launch of a process of self-organisation of the civil society in the Danube region.

The **DANUBE BASIN CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORK PROJECT** and the website www.danubestrategy.eu offer anyone interested the possibility to quickly and concisely inform themselves about contents, forms, time frame and dimension of the Danube Strategy.

Simultaneously, the Danube Basin Civil Society Network Project is the starting point and repository of all civil society groups with activities and interests in the Danube river basin.

Danube Civil Forum - A Network of Networks

The objective of the work of Foster Europe and the Danube Basin Civil Society Network Project is to launch and present a network of networks as Danube Civil Forum, which represents the civil society dimension of the Danube Strategy and provides the civil society decision-making process with a suitable forum and tool.

The Danube Basin Civil Society Network Project and the Danube Civil Forum are to form the structures, which ensure the civil society participation and penetration of the EU strategy for the Danube region.

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Eisenstadt, 15th February 2010