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Implementation of the EU strategy for the Danube region

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European Parliament resolution of 17 February 2011 on the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

(2012/C 188 E/06)

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 192 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
- having regard to the oral questions to the Commission on the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (O-00014/2011 – B7-0011/2011 and O-00029/2011 – B7-0013/2011),
- having regard its Resolution of 21 January 2010 on a European Strategy for the Danube region ⁽¹⁾,
- having regard to the Communication from the Commission of 8 December 2010 on the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (COM(2010)0715) and its Action Plan (SEC(2010)1489),
- having regard to the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (COM(2009)0248),
- having regard to the European Council of 18 and 19 June 2009, which called on the Commission to draw up, by 2010, a European Strategy for the Danube Region,
- having regard to its resolution of 24 March 2009 on the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion and the state of the debate on the future reform of cohesion policy ⁽²⁾,
- having regard to its resolution of 26 October 2006 on the promotion of inland waterway transport: NAIADES, an integrated European Action Programme for inland waterway transport ⁽³⁾,
- having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions of October 2009 on 'An EU strategy for the Danube area',
- having regard to the Opinion of the Committee of the Regions, 'The Committee of the Regions' White Paper on Multilevel Governance' (CdR 89/2009),
- having regard to the Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on 'Macro-regional cooperation - Rolling-out the Baltic Sea Strategy to other macro-regions in Europe' (ECO/251),
- having regard to the Council work programme drawn up by the Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian presidencies,
- having regard to the Espoo, Aarhus and Berne Conventions on environmental protection,
- having regard to the Water Framework Directive and the Helsinki Convention,

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 305 E, 11.11.2010, p. 14.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 117 E, 6.5.2010, p. 65.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 313 E, 20.12.2006, p. 443.

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- having regard to the Belgrade Convention regulating navigation on the Danube,
- having regard to Rules 115(5) and 110(4) of its Rules of Procedure,
- A. whereas the Lisbon Treaty acknowledges territorial cohesion as an objective of the European Union (Article 3 TEU),
- B. whereas macro-regional strategies are aimed at making better use of existing resources to tackle issues of territorial development and identify joint responses to common challenges,
- C. whereas in order to increase the effectiveness of regional policy the idea of an integrated approach should be supported and developed, including the creation of strategies for macro-regions that are EU-level strategies,
- D. whereas the Baltic Sea Strategy already provides a model for coordinating EU policies and funding in geopolitical territorial units – macro-regions – defined on the basis of specific criteria,
- E. whereas the Danube region, comprising 14 European countries and 115 million people both within and outside the EU – Germany, Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Moldova and Ukraine – is an area where enhanced synergies between various EU policies – cohesion, transport, economic, energy, environment, culture, education, agriculture, fisheries, enlargement and neighbourhood policies – can be developed,
- F. whereas the EU Strategy for the Danube Region should therefore combine and coordinate economic, environmental, social and cultural elements,
- G. whereas that strategy should contribute significantly to improving multi-level governance and involvement of partners and civil society operating in the Danube region and make for prosperity, sustainable development, job creation and security in the area,
- H. whereas the Danube region is a significant historical gateway unifying the West and the East of Europe,
- I. whereas the River Danube has almost become an internal waterway of the European Union following consecutive enlargements, and the Danube region may make a substantial contribution to reflecting the changes since these enlargements,
- J. whereas the Danube region constitutes an interconnected macro-region with heterogeneous economic capacities,
- K. whereas the economic development of the Danube region will significantly increase the economic wealth of this macro-region and stimulate employment,
- L. whereas considering the Danube area as a single macro-region would help overcome the regional differences in economic performance and sustain integrated development,
- M. whereas the Danube delta and Budapest, including the Banks of the Danube, have been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1991 and the Danube region includes several Special Protection Areas and Special Areas for Conservation within the Natura 2000 framework; whereas the Danube and the Danube delta have a unique and fragile ecosystem, which is home to rare plant species that are under threat due to pollution,

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1. Welcomes the approval by the Commission of the Strategy for the Danube Region and supports the Action Plan accompanying it, focused on four pillars (connecting the Danube region, protecting the environment, building prosperity and strengthening the Danube region) and meeting the need to improve mobility, energy security, environmental protection, social and economic development, cultural exchange, security and civil protection in the Danube region;
2. Recalls that the European Parliament has been calling for this strategy since 2008 and calls on the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and on the European Council to endorse the EU Strategy for the Danube Region by the June European Council and to start its implementation as quickly as possible;
3. Welcomes, in particular, the fact that the Strategy is the result of broad consultation of interested parties, including national, regional and local authorities and also the academic and business communities as well as NGOs, underlining that this is an important factor for its success; in this regard calls for the establishment of a civil-society forum in the region, bringing together public and private actors, enabling them to become involved in the development of macro-regional strategies;
4. Believes that the Strategy's territorial dimension will lead to the concrete development of the idea of territorial cohesion, which the Lisbon Treaty places on an equal footing with economic and social cohesion, and with this in mind calls on the Commission to engage in active dialogue on the role and impact of EU macro-regional policies after 2013;
5. Stresses that the major added value of EU macro-regional strategies is seen in multi-level cooperation, coordination and better strategic investments using the available funding, not in additional allocation of resources; underlines the conclusions of the Swedish Presidency regarding no new institutions, no new legislation, no new budgets;
6. Calls on the Member States and regions to take advantage of the Structural Funds available for 2007-2013 in order to ensure maximum support for the Strategy, in particular to promote job creation and economic growth in areas most affected by the economic crisis, and, at the same time, recommends, where justified, making provision for changes to the Operational Programmes in the current programming period; highlights that exploiting the particular characteristics of regions could lead to much more effective use of the Structural Funds and the creation of added value at regional level; stresses that non-absorbed financial resources could also be a source of financing for macro-regional projects;
7. Considers that the enlargement of the European Union as well as major trans-national challenges such as the economic crisis, environmental threats, sustainable transport, energy connectivity, resource sustainability and the ecological use of water resources show that the interdependence of individual states is on the rise, sectoral thinking is no longer appropriate and in this context the establishment of macro-regions opens up new, more efficient perspectives for multi-level cooperation by taking an integrated, coordinated approach to sustainable development on a broader regional level and making more efficient use of the Danube region's immense potential for development, and prevention of natural disasters;
8. Stresses therefore that this strategy should be seen in the context of cohesion policy objectives, especially territorial cooperation (Objective 3), and be based on an integrated, cross-domain and territorial approach, aiming at better coordinating policies between the various levels of governance in a given area, with a focus on relevant issues;
9. Underlines that the Danube Strategy is in line with EU2020 objectives, ensuring its conformity with European development trends and the EU's commitment to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth;
10. Highlighting the integrative and unifying character of the strategy, expresses its conviction that the Danube Strategy, if supported by a strong political commitment of the Member States as well as regional and local authorities, could represent a significant contribution to overcoming past divisions in Europe and thus fulfilling the vision of EU integration and to the overall success and the efficiency of the European recovery strategy after the recent years of economic and financial crisis, giving a new impetus to sustainable growth at local, regional, national, transnational and European level, not only within the limits of Central and South-Eastern Europe, but also in a much wider geographical context;

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11. Notes the deep impact the global financial and economic crisis has had on all countries in the region, in particular on the Danube riparian countries; calls on all stakeholders not to weaken their commitment to the EU Strategy for the Danube Region because of the crisis;
12. Emphasises that the Danube region is Europe's gateway to the Western Balkans and that therefore the European Strategy for the Danube region is not only conducive to the improvement of neighbourhood relations in Central and South-Eastern Europe but provides important added value in the EU's Eastern European policy, thus representing an excellent opportunity for the entire Union to fortify its political and economic cooperation with the Balkans, and, as a consequence, to contribute to the expansion and consolidation of the process of European integration in the region;
13. Emphasises that the Danube Strategy, together with the various forms of cross-border cooperation that it implies, could easily become a contributing factor for economic, social and territorial development, generating well-being, improving the quality of life, catalysing local and regional efforts, including in relation to development needs, and contributing to the creation of strong cross-border interrelations, including small-scale projects (people-to-people programmes) in various fields such as culture, education, employment, environmental protection, industrial supply chains, municipal cooperation projects and transnational transport modernisation initiatives;
14. Believes that the development of large-scale strategies, such as macro-regional strategies, should contribute to enhancing the role of the local and regional level in the implementation of EU policy more generally;
15. Stresses the fact that the new 'macro-regional' framework of cooperation has to ensure that the natural handicaps of the peripheral regions are converted into assets and opportunities, and that the development of these regions is stimulated;
16. Stresses the need to involve the relevant regional and local stakeholders, such as the Council of Danube Cities and Regions, and civil society in the Danube region at all stages of decision-making (preparation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation) in order to find solutions to common challenges, to select and implement efficiently the concrete projects and to achieve a good governance mechanism; urges the governments to support and facilitate measures to enable pro-active participation by NGOs, trade associations and civil society, with due regard also for women's networks and minority groups;
17. Recommends, in this context, increasing the local communities' involvement by setting up wider and more focused communication and consultation tools, including through the local media (local television, radio and printed and online newspapers); suggests a special web portal devoted to the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, which would act as a forum for the exchange of experiences regarding current and future projects undertaken by central and local government, NGOs and other entities active in the Danube region;
18. Recalls the results of the learning experience of the Baltic Sea Strategy in the form of transparency of the decision-making process, including allocation of EU funding;
19. Encourages political commitment to improve the trust of citizens and stakeholders in political as well as local authorities;
20. Considers that the successful implementation of the EU Danube Strategy depends on the ability, capacity and preparedness of municipal actors to intervene on regional labour markets with project initiatives triggering local demand for labour, creating the basis for smart and environment-friendly growth and improving cooperation between border regions in different Member States; draws attention to the disproportion in terms of economic development and innovation that exists in the Danube region and the necessity to increase the potential of all areas, including the highly developed ones, as they can help in pulling forward the least advantaged regions; points out the need to promote new areas with development and innovation potential and to take the opportunity of using the added value of the Baltic Sea Strategy and of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region;

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21. Calls for development of the energy infrastructure, energy efficiency and renewable energies in order to establish an integrated and well functioning market for energy;
22. Takes note of the medium- and long-term forecasts which indicate that the Southern regions of Europe – including the Member States located in the south-eastern part of Europe – will be particularly affected by the consequences of climate change; is convinced that the Danube Strategy has an important role to play in this regard, and should be designed with the objective of mitigating adverse effects of climate change in the Danube region, taking into account the complex role and nature of the network of rivers (water supply, ecological aspects, transport infrastructure, irrigation and agricultural dimension, protected fauna and flora, etc.);
23. Points out that from an ecological point of view Central and South-Eastern Europe is one of the richest but at the same time one of the most vulnerable areas of Europe, characterised by an ecosystem of high ecological complexity and great value, therefore requiring a high level of protection; welcomes the aim of the European Strategy for the Danube Region to create a liveable, sustainable and at the same time developed, prosperous Danube region by managing environmental risks such as floods and industrial pollution, preserving the quality and quantity of water reserves and ensuring their sustainable use, and preserving biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils; stresses that protecting the environment in the Danube basin is an important aspect which should stimulate responsible agricultural and rural development of the region; calls for improvements to the ecological status of the Danube, and for measures to reduce pollution and to prevent further releases of oil and other toxic and harmful substances; stresses that a good ecological status of the Danube is a prerequisite for all human activity along the river and recommends that the environmental targets should be considered in particular;
24. Is convinced that measures aimed at conserving the natural flood retention capacity of the Danube basin and preventing the recurrence of floods are most appropriate to cater for the Danube region's unique sensitivity and vulnerability; calls on the Commission and the Member States to ensure that EU money is spent on projects that are consistent with the implementation of EU environmental legislation;
25. Points out the economic interdependence of the states in the Danube region and stresses the importance of investing in ITC and in the development of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises and their research departments and of promoting innovation, entrepreneurship and the growth of a knowledge economy in order to ensure sustainable and efficient development;
26. Stresses that smart economic development and investment are very promising areas of economic growth and that green technologies and ecological modernisation, such as improved energy efficiency, renewable energies and better waste management, can contribute to the sustainable development of the region and help reduce the negative environmental impacts of economic activity;
27. Acknowledges the important role played by the Danube Strategy in promoting a green economy, green innovation and in a larger sense research and innovation aiming at the emergence of a new, competitive low-carbon economy and more environment-friendly approaches in the development of cross-border industrial cooperation projects; urges the riparian states to give top priority to the establishment of shared hydrological and water quality testing facilities, without which many business developments cannot succeed;
28. Underlines the importance of promoting sustainable tourism in the region, noting the economic potential of the cycling trail along almost the entire Danube, and of establishing the Danube region as a European tourist destination and developing a European brand for the Danube region;
29. Supports the establishment of business development networks and non-governmental trade promotion bodies which can coordinate and promote future development opportunities and cooperation between companies – especially SMEs – research, universities and public authorities in order to enhance the potential of knowledge-based regional innovation clusters and to boost regional competitiveness;

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30. Underlines that all transport modes should be updated to EU standards and that environmentally friendly transport modes such as rail or inland waterway transport should be assigned priority where appropriate while planning the transport system of the region with full respect for all relevant elements of the EU acquis;
31. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to improve the infrastructure and economic performance of the Danube region and complete the implementation of TEN-T projects related to the Danube region in a speedy and environmentally sustainable way; taking into account the review of the TEN-T guidelines, calls on the Commission and the Member States to take into consideration the need for development of transport systems in the Danube region;
32. Emphasises three important levels of infrastructure development where the coordinated approach of the Danube Strategy could facilitate synergies: (i) the multi-modal corridor along the Danube (TEN-T priority project 18), (ii) interlinks between the Danube multi-modal corridor and neighbouring Member States (TEN-T priority projects related to the Danube region), (iii) cross-border bottlenecks on TEN-T, national and regional networks;
33. Underlines that the 'Joint Statement on the Development of Inland Navigation and Environmental Protection in the Danube River Basin' was drawn up by the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, the Danube Commission and the International Sava River Basin Commission and offers general advice for waterway infrastructure projects addressed both to technical planners and to other interested stakeholders who want to be involved in a waterway development planning process, and that these guidelines call for an integrated planning team to assess needs and to propose as many win-win measures as possible to improve both navigation and ecological status; recommends that the Commission respect the commitments under the Joint Statement;
34. Considers that, in line with the principle of efficient co-modality and innovation, the combination between improved inland ports and logistics, inland navigation and rail transport provides considerable economic development potential also for the EU's neighbouring countries in the Danube region and could help to reduce the transport bottlenecks;
35. Points to the need to encourage the development of clean and efficient vessels under the Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development with a particular focus on information and communication technologies and the design, eco-efficiency and equipment of vessels;
36. Underlines that, linked by the Main-Danube canal, the Rhine and the Danube directly connect eleven countries from the North Sea to the Black Sea over a length of 3 500 km and emphasises the need to extend the EUSDR towards the Black Sea region; points out that the sustainable development of the Danube region will further enhance the geostrategic importance of the Black Sea region;
37. Encourages the enhancement of the Danube's cultural environment by promoting cultural dialogue, supporting university exchange programmes and youth projects based on transnational cooperation, fostering sustainable tourism and protecting the historical and architectural heritage;
38. Highlights the vital need for cooperation in cultural projects in order to support intercultural dialogue and understanding among the countries of the Danube Region; emphasises in this regard the active involvement of young people via cultural and educational facilities in order to create multinational networks;
39. Encourages the allocation of more resources to projects and networks of projects for vulnerable groups, in particular Roma;

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40. Stresses the necessity of a coordinated approach with a view to more efficient use of all available EU funds in the countries in the Danube region so that the goals of the Strategy can be fulfilled to the best possible extent; underlines also the necessity of enough flexibility in order to allow the development of Danube Strategy-related projects within the existing Operational Programmes;
41. Encourages the development of specific provisions with the forthcoming general regulation on the Structural Funds on the basis of territorial cooperation provisions that are clear, take into account differences of administrative culture and do not impose extra administrative burdens on the beneficiaries, in order to strengthen the cooperation between countries and regions, and the development of further joint action strategies which may enhance the region's attractiveness at European and international levels and may subsequently constitute a model for cross-border and transnational cooperation;
42. Draws attention to the existing Preparatory action 'The definition of the governance model for the EU Danube Region - better and effective coordination' and calls on the Commission and the Member States to properly use its budget to finance activities relating to the definition of the governance model required by the development and implementation of the EUSDR; underlines the importance of providing the necessary technical assistance for the implementation of the actions and projects carried out in the framework of the EUSDR; considers that the costs of technical assistance should be better recognised and considered while planning the financial framework for the Strategy and that the amount provided for assistance should be available for partners if it is used for purposes and actions coordinated at macro-regional level;
43. Welcomes the announcement of the priority area coordinators for the EUSDR by the Commission on 3 February 2011; considers that from now on the countries and regions which take the lead role in priority areas of work should drive implementation of the Strategy by agreeing a work programme, identifying sources of finance, strengthening cooperation between countries and regions in that particular area and launching the most immediate actions to help the Danube region to fully exploit its economic potential and, especially, respecting the deadline for the implementation of the flagship projects in that particular area;
44. Calls on the Commission, in the context of the need to carry out an interim analysis of the implementation of the EUSDR, to prepare concrete instruments and criteria for evaluating projects based on indicators that allow comparisons to be made;
45. Calls on the Commission to analyse the first results and experiences in connection with the implementation of the EUSDR, which, together with the EU Baltic Sea Strategy, will help to map out possible sources and methods of financing for macro-regional strategies within the existing framework;
46. Calls on the Commission to regularly inform and consult the European Parliament on the status of implementation and updating of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region as well as on EU-funded projects relating to the Danube region;
47. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee and the other relevant institutions.
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