

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE MINISTERS OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE
PARTICIPATING STATES OF THE EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION
AND OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Vienna, 26 June 2014

The meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Participating States of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) took place in Vienna on 26 June 2014 with the participation of the European Commission. Building upon the positive experience of the meeting in Bucharest it was linked with the 3rd Annual Forum of the EU Danube Strategy in Vienna on 26 – 27 June 2014.

Ministers expressed their profound solidarity with the countries recently affected by floods and their firm commitment to further enhance the activities being undertaken in the framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region together with the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) in terms of co-operation in flood prevention, protection and relief.

Ministers underlined the value-added of the Strategy with regard to enhancing European integration and economic, social and territorial cohesion in the Danube Region.

Recalling the Council Conclusions of 22 October 2013 regarding the added value of macro-regional strategies, Ministers and the European Commission express their satisfaction with the progress achieved until now in the implementation of the Strategy and share the commitment to continued political guidance of the EUSDR-process.

Ministers thanked the Priority Area Steering Group members and co-ordinators for the work done so far. They committed to provide continued political guidance and work with the competent European Commission structures, in order to secure efficient planning and strategic co-ordination and invite the European Commission to continue playing a leading role in the strategic co-ordination of key delivery stages of the macro-regional strategies, in partnership with the Participating States. They welcome the full-fledged participation of the European Commission in this work as indispensable for the success of the Strategy. In this context, Ministers welcome the European Commission Report of 20 May 2014 on the governance of macro-regional strategies.

Furthermore, Ministers considered the full-fledged participation of non-EU Participating States on an equal footing as indispensable for the success of the Strategy. Support for the participation of Steering Group members from non-member states should be provided via all instruments possible, including the Danube transnational programme.

Reiterating the Council Conclusions of 22 October 2013, Ministers welcomed the emerging parliamentary dimension of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and the upcoming 2nd Conference of Danube Parliamentarians in Budapest in October, 2014.

Ministers agreed that it will be crucial in the next phase to make further progress in focusing co-operation on policy issues of special importance ensuring efficient and effective coordination with other relevant policies, programmes and instruments.

Ministers encouraged the European Commission, the National Co-ordinators, Priority Area Co-ordinators and the Priority Area Steering Groups to present concrete proposals in this respect.

Ministers reiterated that building upon existing regional co-operation formats and fora, which have particular relevance in the context of the enlargement process, such as the Central European Initiative, the ICPDR, the Energy Community, the Regional Co-operation Council, the South East Europe Cooperation Process will broaden the horizon, with benefits for the whole region. They emphasized the importance of streamlining the interconnections between EUSDR and relevant regional institutions, while avoiding potential duplications and overlaps. Complementing the Strategy with an outward-looking regional development approach will strengthen existing strategic linkages with the Baltic Sea Region and the Eastern Partnership countries, including connections to the extended Black Sea region.

Recalling the Joint Statements of St. Pölten 2012 and Bucharest 2013, Ministers reiterated the need for more co-ordinated action in contributing to the Europe 2020 objectives and in preparing the implementation of related objectives and priorities of the EU funding period 2014-2020. Ministers expressed their support for the overall embedding of the Danube Strategy in the programming documents of the Danube countries concerning the European Structural and Investment Funds and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, where appropriate and possible. For this purpose, effective cross-border interlinking of already decided national measures on a macro-regional scale is the task of the Priority Area Steering Groups. In this context, Priority Area Co-ordinators with the support of the European Commission are responsible for providing operational orientation to their respective priority areas, including via meetings of ministers responsible for the priority area where appropriate.

Ministers recognized that predictable policies and administrative practice for all economic and social actors is necessary in all our countries, in order to achieve socially fair, inclusive and sustainable prosperity. This is particularly important in view of the strongly welcomed involvement of the private sector, including private and corporate foundations, in the implementation of the Strategy, in line with the Council Conclusions of 22 October 2013. In this context, the full-fledged involvement of civil society, as well as of all levels of public administration, including municipalities and regions through multi-layer governance in line with the principle of subsidiarity is of crucial importance.

In addition, Ministers and the European Commission are fully committed to the swift, accelerated completion of the projects and actions already under implementation, in particular those of high visible impact and a tangible job creation component. Additional high visibility projects will also be promoted as a priority by the European Commission and the Ministers in the framework of the Priority Area Steering groups. To facilitate this, Ministers welcome the close co-ordination between the implementation of the EU-Strategy for the Danube Region and relevant European Structural and Investment Fund programmes in their countries. Ministers call on Priority Area Steering groups to further develop a joint approach for labelling strategic projects for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region until the end of 2014.

Building on the Council Conclusions of 22 October 2013 and welcoming the European Commission Report on governance of macro-regional strategies of 20 May

2014 as a clear basis for achieving results, Ministers have agreed on the following arrangements:

- Ministers responsible for the Strategy can convene for informal ministerial meetings back to back with the Annual Forum. The rotation principle for the chair of the Strategy should take into account EU Presidencies in the Council, presidencies in other macro-regional institutions or be on a voluntary basis.
- Henceforth, the role of “National Contact Points” (NCP) shall be renamed as “National Co-ordinators” (NC) to better reflect their national co-ordination role.
- The National Co-ordinators shall convene for regular meetings and serve as an interface between the political level and the Priority Areas. The European Structural and Investment Funds co-ordinators can be included into the national delegations as appropriate. The National Co-ordinators shall meet at least twice in the time span between two Annual Fora. The European Commission will be invited to the meetings. As a general rule, these meetings will be chaired by the host country of the coming Annual Forum.
- Informal Priority Area ministerial meetings can be convened upon consensus of the Participating states, if they are deemed necessary and appropriate for enhancing the performance of the respective Priority Area.
- Ministers took note of the proposal of the European Commission to establish a Danube Strategy Point, in order to enhance co-operation and strengthen synergies between the Strategy and programme structures. They agreed that the main tasks and the financing of the Strategy Point should be further defined in advance.
- With reference to the Commission Report of 20 May 2014, where the nomination of a Special Representative for the Strategy was listed as an option to ensure strategic leadership besides the country holding the rotating chair and taking into consideration the Commission recommendation on greater clarity in the organisation of work as a special need of the Strategy, Ministers propose to examine the value-added of a special representative.

As a follow-up to the 3rd Annual Forum in Vienna and in preparation of the 4th Annual Forum in Ulm 2015, Ministers encouraged specific efforts on the following issues:

- Ministers and the European Commission will strive for maximum impact and results from the Strategy and encourage the individual Priority Area Steering Groups to develop further their strategic concepts for making progress in their respective Priority Areas until mid-2015, including adapting relevant targets towards 2020 and updating links to relevant policies and programmes. Ministers responsible for the Strategy will make efforts to mobilize their colleagues from line ministries in their national governments to actively work together for implementing the Danube Strategy.

- In view of the 4th Annual Forum in Ulm 2015, special emphasis will be put on citizen involvement, skilled labour, entrepreneurship and competitiveness as essential horizontal aspects of the Strategy.
- Recalling the Council Conclusions, of 22 October 2013, evaluation/performance criteria shall be developed for priority areas in close cooperation between the European Commission, National Co-ordinators and Priority Area Co-ordinators and shall be presented by mid-2015. Subsequently, an evaluation process should be launched
- Ministers responsible for the Strategy should contribute to the design of governance support options in the relevant EU programming frameworks, especially in the Danube transnational programme, which should be concentrated to enhance the operational work of Priority Area co-ordinators. National Co-ordinators will co-operate closely with programme authorities and bodies.