

Kick-off Steering Group (SG) Meeting of the Priority Area 10 (PA 10) of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)

Date: July 1st, 2011

Venue: Vienna City Hall

Participants: see annexed list

Minutes

Morning Session (10am – 12.15pm)

Mr. Puchinger chaired the Kick-off Steering Group Meeting of Priority Area 10, "To set up Institutional Capacity and Cooperation". He welcomed the participants and introduced the agenda of the meeting.

Ms. Repanšek introduced the SG members to the current state of the EU Danube Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) and its Priority Area 10.

She reminded that the Strategy consists of 11 priority areas grouped in 4 pillars: Connecting the Danube Region, Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region, Building Prosperity in the Danube Region and Strengthening the Danube Region. Furthermore, she stressed that PA 10 has a stronger crosscutting nature compared to other PAs, and also comprises horizontal Actions. Ms. Repanšek presented first results of the visibility of the EUSDR regarding newspaper articles published since November 2010. The media monitoring of COMPRESS, a PR institution contracted by the City of Vienna, clearly shows that the number of articles rose significantly since November 2010.

Mr. Puchinger introduced the Steering Group to the organisational structure of PA 10. He pointed out that the European Commission provides strategic guidance and the Priority Area Coordinators (PAC) have the role of facilitators, managers, and coordinators. They are also responsible for the reporting towards the Commission. Furthermore the PAC have to ensure policy discussion, development of actions, communication and visibility of results. For these tasks the Working Groups (WG) of the Steering Group will play a vital role.

Against this background the SG members have an advisory role and support the PAC to facilitate the implementation of the PA 10, which is the most crucial duty. Thus, they act as multipliers on national level. Following the Kick-off Meeting the SG members are asked to define and report the national priorities, possible projects as well as financing options.

Mr. Sollgruber from DG Regional Policy stressed that the implementation of Priority Area 10 is also important for the success of other PA (e.g. the exchange of best practices emphasized in PA 10) due to its crosscutting nature. He reminded that for the implementation of the EUSDR the stakeholders should make use of existing structures and networks. Mr. Sollgruber emphasized the importance of communicating the strategy and for presenting results. He ensured that the Commission will support the PAC and its SG members with the implementation of the PA.

Mr. Sollgruber pointed out that for the implementation of the PA, the European Parliament will provide financial support which should be available by the end of September/beginning of October. In the medium term the EC plans to elaborate a study about the funding of technical assistance facilities in order to provide guidance regarding financing opportunities for the implementation of projects and small-scale initiatives.

Afternoon Session (13pm – 16:30pm)

The afternoon session focussed on making Priority Area 10 operational. Therefore, Mr. Puchinger and Ms. Repanšek proposed the setting up of four Working Groups, which are thematically split between Vienna and Slovenia:

Working Group 1: Institutional Capacity (Slovenia)

Working Group 2: Civil Society (Vienna)

Working Group 3: Regional Cooperation (Vienna)

Working Group 4: Financing (Slovenia)

The PAC asked the SG Members to collect first ideas of how to make the Working Groups operational. Mr. Puchinger reminded the participants of making use of existing structures, networks and stakeholders. The SG members are invited to discuss about national priorities and bottlenecks as well as possible stakeholders and institutions along the four Working Groups.

Mr. Sollgruber added that the participants should focus on a timeframe of two years in the discussion.

Mr. Schneidewind, metis, pointed out that complex issues which cannot be discussed in today's meeting, such as definitions, the detailed breaking down of actions into projects, etc., will be one of the themes for the Working Groups.

The **Working Group 1** (Institutional Capacity) comprises the Action "To combat institutional capacity and public service related problems in the Danube Region".

Mr. Kovacic, representative of the Ministry of Public Administration in Croatia, raised the question whether the participants share the same meaning of "Institutional Capacity". Ms. Repanšek stressed that Institutional Capacity should include the following points:

- Stakeholder ownership
- Efficiency of policy instruments
- Effectiveness and organisational arrangements (processes)

The participants agreed that discussions and agreements on common understandings of the content of the Actions will be one of the tasks of the Working Groups.

Mr. Langer, representing the Council of the Danube Cities and Regions, emphasized the importance of academic exchanges in the Danube Region. Ms. Repanšek agreed on that point and argued that in South East Europe the local levels are often undernourished and should be included in the exchange. Mr. Urban added that one of the main bottlenecks concern also the offer of trainings.

Ms. Mitea added that the Austrian Public Procurement Authority could be an important stakeholder in Working Group 1.

Ms. Kovacic argued that a knowledge database would be of utmost importance.

The **Working Group 2** (Civil society) includes two actions „to improve the trust of citizens and stakeholders in political authorities”, „to establish a Danube Civil Society Forum”¹.

Mr. Puchinger pointed out that the main issue is to make civil society more visible and to strengthen their role in order to achieve an equal position with other stakeholders in different processes of urban and regional development. He invites the participants to collect ideas of how to realize this objective.

Mr. Langer stressed that the Council of the Danube Cities and Regions has the idea to strengthen the European identity on the base of a Danube Youth association, similar to the German French Youth Association, which could be linked with civil society initiatives within Priority Area 10. Furthermore, he plans to set up training programmes in order to develop European standards and structures of self-government of Cities and Regions.

Mr. Codreanu, representative of the Government of the Republic of Moldova, argued that both groups of stakeholders, civil society and governments, are of importance in order to foster the role of civil society.

Working Group 3 (Regional cooperation) includes the actions “to ensure sufficient information flow and exchange at all levels”, “to facilitate the administrative cooperation of communities living in border Regions” and “to build Metropolitan Regions in the Danube Region”.

Mr. Puchinger pointed out that the above Actions are already based on experiences in particular cross-border and transnational programmes like the South East Europe Programme and invites the participants to discuss about other stakeholders who would fit into this Working Group.

Ms. Fekete, Ministry of Public Administration and Justice in Hungary, emphasized the importance of cross-border cooperation. Furthermore, cooperation between local and regional authorities should be strengthened. She proposed that representatives of relevant EGTCs should participate in this Working Group. Mr. Stöckl, Senior Expert, agreed on the argument that cooperation should be strengthened within different stakeholders and reminded that the whole Strategy is cooperation driven. Mr. Sollgruber also supports the idea of including a member of EGTC in this Working Group.

Mr. Gagov, Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works in Bulgaria, stated that there should be a linkage between the transport system and other sectors. It is very important to arrive at a common view with the cities and cross-border areas because they often have different approaches.

Mr. Urban added that majors could be interesting stakeholders to participate in this Working Group.

Ms. Filipovic, representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, stated that between Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria there exist already well functioning border communities connecting these countries. Another example shows the border community between Hungary and Romania, which could be an important point of contact for the upcoming Working Group activities.

¹ The action „to ensure sufficient information flow and exchange at all levels“ was transmitted to WG 3 after the meetings since it appears to match much better with the cooperation and planning issues addressed in WG3.

Ms. Stöckl and Ms. Pleše, Office for Development Strategy and Coordination of EU Funds in Croatia, agreed that a platform for exchanging experiences and good examples is required in order to implement Priority Area 10.

The **Working Group 4** (Financing) includes the actions “to review bottlenecks relating to the low absorption rate of EU funds and to ensure better coordination of funding”, “to support the development of local financial products for business and community development” and “to examine the feasibility of a Danube Investment Framework”.

Mr. Sollgruber emphasized the need for instruments to finance small-scale projects, especially for non EU Member States. He refers to the financial instrument JASPERS (Joint Assistance to Support Projects in European Regions). As for the implementation of the EUSDR similar financial instruments may be required, in particular for small-scale projects.

Mr. Savić, representing the Office for Development Strategy and Coordination of EU Funds in Croatia, concludes that the Working Groups have to focus in a first step on projects, which potentially will be financed and asks in which way the SG or the PAC will be able to intervene in the existing funding mechanisms and funding decisions.

Next steps

Mr. Puchinger pointed out the next steps that will follow. These include the following meetings:

- 1st Working Group Meeting at the end of September / beginning of October
- 2nd, 3rd and 4th Working Group Meetings in autumn
- 2nd Steering Group Meeting in February 2012

Mr. Puchinger and the Steering Group Members agreed that the participants will provide feedback and contribute to the launch of the Working Groups by the end of August. This feedback should include concrete project ideas as well as propositions regarding Working Group Members.

The participants will receive the minutes of the meeting within the next two weeks.

Mr. Puchinger concluded that the Kick-off Meeting has been successfully finalized and thanked all participants for the in-depth discussion on these very complex issues.