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DECLARATION of 4th National Participation Day Ukraine "TOWARDS A GREENER, DEMOCRATIC AND RESILIENT UKRAINE"

15-16 May 2024

We, 46 participants of the 4th National Participation Day "TOWARDS A GREENER, DEMOCRATIC AND RESILIENT UKRAINE", who represent civil society organisations, academic and expert community, the central and local government based in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region and Kyiv, as well as representative of the Danube Civil Society Forum, the EUSDR Priority Area 10 "Institutional Capacity and Cooperation", Danube Strategy Point Vienna, Foster Europe – Foundation for Strong European Regions, European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA), and civil society of the Republic of Moldova, have met together in Frumushika-Nova in the southwest of the Odesa Region to discuss a vision of Ukraine's recovery and transformation with the focus on green recovery, democracy and innovative approaches to socio-economic development.

The 4th National Participation Day has become the first NPD Ukraine since Russia has started a full-scale invasion of Ukraine taking lives of Ukrainian people – soldiers and civilians – and dramatically increasing the number of people in need. The war has caused a humanitarian crisis, huge economic losses, damages to infrastructure, natural ecosystems and protected areas, contamination of agricultural and natural areas with landmines and other explosive remnants of war. We realise that the effects of the war will have a lasting impact even after it is over. Therefore, we strongly believe that a thorough discussion of Ukraine's recovery and transformation is needed, and it should be based on a dialogue between Ukraine's civil society and expert community, on the one hand, and the government, on the other hand, to ensure Ukraine's future as a green, democratic, and economically strong country resilient to the threats to its independence and national security.

This is the first time when the National Participation Day takes place since Ukraine has been granted EU candidate status. We welcome this historic breakthrough for Ukraine and emphasise the importance of strengthening cooperation between Ukraine's and EU member countries' civil societies.

We strongly believe that the EU Strategy for the Danube Region may become an important instrument for accelerating the accession of both Ukraine and Moldova to the EU. In this context, we point out that a common agenda of the participation of Ukraine and Moldova in the EUSDR is needed to ensure common approaches to common cross-border issues and their deeper involvement in making the Danube Region a space of prosperity and peace. We call on the Government of Ukraine and the Government of the Republic of Moldova to develop such an agenda involving civil society and scientific and expert communities of both countries.

The Danube Region's civil society is one of the key actors building partnerships and launching initiatives across the macro-region that essentially help with the EUSDR implementation and its objectives' achievement. As for Ukraine, the Ukrainian civil society has become one of the drivers of the EUSDR implementation in Ukraine significantly fostering the country's involvement in the Danube strategy process. We call on the DG REGIO, the EUSDR Presidency and governing bodies, and the national governments and EUSDR national coordinators to ensure that the role and contribution of civil society is visible, and civil society's efforts are duly supported.

In this context, we emphasise the need for EU funding for civil society initiatives with simpler rules and funding schemes that may ensure access to EU funds for a wider circle of civil society organisations across the Danube Region which very often are not able to meet the requirements of Interreg programmes those funding schemes are based on the reimbursement principle. It is especially important to Ukraine's SCOs in the time of war, when national and regional public funds are no longer available for CSOs' initiatives and projects.

At the same time, we call on the Government of Ukraine to put forth more efforts for ensuring civil society organisation's wider access to EU funding, in particular, by signing the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme to which Ukraine has not yet officially joined although expressed its interest to participate in the programme.

We strongly believe that exchange of experience between Ukraine, Moldova and the countries of the Western Balkans as well as better synergy between two macro-regional strategies of the EU – for the Danube Region and for the Adriatic and Ionian Region – are important to ensure a success of the EU Enlargement process.

We recognise the importance of closer cooperation with the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and its Ukrainian Platform to join our efforts to support Ukraine's accession to the EU.

We emphasise the importance of holding Ukraine's National Participation Days in the EUSDR on a regular basis ensuring that they have governmental support and less depend on enthusiasm and capacities of individuals or individual organisations. In order to involve as much number and variety of stakeholders across the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region, it is of vital importance to ensure that National Participation Days are held in rotation in each oblast of the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region – Zakarpatska, Ivano-Frankivska, Chernivetska, and Odes'ka.

Following the conclusions made by three working groups of the 4th National Participation Day Ukraine, we state that:

UKRAINE'S RECOVERY MUST BE GREEN

- Environmental and climate policies must be integrated into sectoral policies of Ukraine ensuring that the objectives of the European Green Deal are observed and Ukraine's economy becomes low-carbon, energy-efficient, and nature-oriented.
- The Ukrainian people and economic sectors are seriously suffering from the energy crisis has been caused by Russia's attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Under these circumstances, renewable energy is seen as of high importance in the context of Ukraine's recovery. At the same time, we clearly state that each particular renewable energy project needs a precise environmental impact assessment as, for example, the construction on new hydropower plants may seriously affect ecological status of rivers, and the construction of solar power plants without facilities for recycling solar panels may lead to a number of ecological problems in the medium term. Therefore, to ensure that national and foreign investments are efficient and pose no threats to valuable natural ecosystems, we underline the importance of observing the environmental impact assessment procedure stipulated by the legislation of Ukraine that, among others, provides for public participation.
- The loss of big agricultural areas in the southeast of Ukraine, which will require mine clearance and recultivation when the war is over and the occupied territories are liberated, has posed a threat to valuable ecosystems, especially vulnerable steppe ecosystems and other grasslands, putting them at risk of conversion to croplands.

Soils are the largest terrestrial sink of carbon. Conversion of natural to agricultural ecosystems causes depletion of the soil organic carbon pool by as much as 60% in soils of temperate regions. Therefore, conservation and ecological restoration of steppe and other grassland ecosystems is highly important not only for nature protection purposes, but in terms of decarbonisation too.

- We strongly believe that agriculture in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region has to become greener to ensure food security, and to avoid soil degradation and soil and water pollution with pesticides and other agrochemicals which are often enormously used to increase crop capacity.
- Waste management and wastewater treatment remain an issue in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region, especially in rural areas. There is the urgent need for programmes supporting public awareness raising, waste sorting and creation of decentralised wastewater treatment and reuse systems using, for example, constructed wetlands.
- We strongly believe that nature-based solutions must be integrated into regional and local community development strategies across the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region to ensure ecosystem and biodiversity conservation and restoration, wise use of natural resources, and local community sustainable development and resilience to the effects of climate change and natural hazards.
- We welcome the good progress in the development and public discussion of a Danube River Basin Management Plan 2025-2030 covering the sub-basins of the Tisza, Prut and Siret, and the Lower Danube, that is expected to be adopted by the end of 2024. The Action Plan of the DRBMP consists of 312 measures to achieve its goals which are expected to be integrated into Ukraine's recovery and modernisation plan.
- We call on the Verchovna Rada (National Parliament of Ukraine) and the Government of Ukraine to foster the adoption of a Law on the Emerald Network of Ukraine that is extremely topical in terms of the creation of a legal framework for the Emerald Network in Ukraine and Emerald sites' protection, and the fulfilment of Ukraine's commitments as an EU candidate country.
- We also call on the Government of Ukraine and the regional governments of the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region to foster the fulfilment of Ukraine's commitment to increase the percentage of protected areas that is still extremely low in the Odesa Region, for example.
- We underline that green recovery of Ukraine, in particular in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region, is possible even in the time of war. In particular, obsolete and structurally weak dam removal and ecological restoration of small and medium-sized rivers to make them free-flowing, stopping virgin steppe plowing, and ecosystem restoration of steppes and meadows for their integrated use as well as rewilding programmes are going on now and must be integrated into regional and local recovery and transformation plans.

UKRAINE'S RECOVERY MUST BE DEMOCRATIC

- Defending Ukraine against Russia's military aggression, the people of Ukraine is fighting not only for its territory, but for democracy, human rights, and supremacy of law. Therefore, we, understanding that some constitutional rights may be restricted in the time of war, underline that such restrictions may be introduced strictly in line with the Constitution of Ukraine, any violence of human rights may not be justified by the wartime challenges, and any attempts to undermine the values of freedom and democracy are inadmissible.
- Local democracy and civil society involvement are vitally important preconditions of a success of Ukraine's recovery and transformation. We welcome efforts to strengthen local democracy in the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region, in particular, the ALDA's efforts to set up a Local Democracy Agency in Odesa together with the Odesa District Council, and we encourage other local communities of the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region to make efforts for promoting local democracy across the region.
- The Ukrainian platform of the Danube Civil Society Forum established in 2015 has proven itself as an efficient tool for bringing together and mobilising civil society actors across the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war have made it much less active over a few recent years. We consider revitalisation of the DCSF Ukrainian platform very important in the context of Ukraine's accession to the EU and Ukraine's recovery and transformation. At the same time, we recognise that the lack of financial resources makes

this process difficult and requires more joint efforts of the DCSF Ukrainian platform members, who are still active.

- The decentralisation has been recognised as one of the most successful elements of the administrative reform in Ukraine before the war. Understanding well that the wartime challenges require a higher centralisation of power and financial resources, we are hopeful of temporary character of the departure from the decentralisation policy.
- Local communities are those who implement recovery plans on the ground. Therefore, we would like to stress that financial resources (national and international, including EU funding) have to be available to local communities to make them more strong, sustainable and resilient in the process of Ukraine's recovery and transformation.
- Cross-border cooperation between local communities along Ukraine's southwest border with Moldova and the EU is important in terms of local democracy and common solutions to trans-boundary problems, and directly contributes to the EUSDR implementation. We welcome EU support to cross-border and transnational cooperation available through the Interreg programmes, but emphasise the need for seed money for local self-government bodies and local actors (local development agencies and civil society organisations) to help them with establishing cross-border partnerships, and to enable them to implement joint small-scale actions and micro-projects which often may be very effective in terms of tackling particular local problems, including trans-boundary ones.

UKRAINE'S RECOVERY MUST BE SOCIALLY ORIENTED AND INCLUSIVE

- The human capital is Ukraine's most valuable asset to its recovery and transformation. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has caused the largest migration in Europe since the end of the World War II. As it has been estimated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), up to a third of the population has been displaced, there are currently around 6 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe. Almost four million remain internally displaced within Ukraine, and big number of them is in the four regions of the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region. Therefore, we emphasise the need for both programmes encouraging Ukrainian refugees to come back to Ukraine and programmes for social reintegration and employment for internally displaced people. We also underline that internally displaced people may provide valuable human capital for recovery and transformation across the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region.
- The war has dramatically increased the number of heavily wounded soldiers and civilians, and soldiers and civilians with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSR), and the number of such people is increasingly growing.
- We emphasise the urgent need for the improvement and creation of inclusive infrastructure that is seen as an essential element of social inclusivity of people with disabilities.
- There is the urgent need for the launch of programmes for veterans' social rehabilitation and adaptation, and PTSR overcoming. That requires special funding programmes and training of social rehabilitation specialists.
- Social adaptation of internally displaced young people is especially needed focusing on their education and professional orientation. That also requires special programmes and must be seen as an investment in the Danube Region's prosperity and social stability.
- Taking into consideration the decrease in private donations and the extreme limit of own funds of Ukraine's civil society actors conducting humanitarian aid initiatives and dealing with social rehabilitation and adaptation of wounded soldiers and civilians, and people with PTSR, we are applying to the European Commission and the national governments of the countries of the Danube Region for launching special funding schemes to support social rehabilitation and adaptation programmes in Ukraine and the Ukrainian part of the Danube Region in particular.
- We welcome the idea of launching a "Nature for People" that suggests that natural sites and rewilding areas of the Danube Delta, Budjak Steppe, and the Carpathians may be used for soldiers' and civilians' social rehabilitation and PTSR overcoming.