

The Implementation and Future Developments of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Speech by Dr Uno Silberg, President of the European Alliance group at the Committee of the Regions

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Dear guests,
Dear Members of the European Parliament,
Dear Ms Țicău,

First of all, I would like to thank Ms Țicău for the invitation and for the opportunity to present the work of the Committee of the Regions in relation to the EU Strategy of the Danube Region.

I am particularly glad to discuss this topic with you because in 2010, before the adoption of the Strategy, the European Alliance group in the Committee of the Regions, of which I am president, held an external meeting in the region of the Danube delta, more precisely in Tulcea, Romania.

We were amazed by the natural and cultural heritage of the region but, at the same time, concerned over its conservation and environmental economic and social sustainability. That is why we called for an "efficient, sustainable "green" strategy which is able to achieve both goals of connectivity, navigability and economic development while, at the same time, ensuring due respect for natural resources and biodiversity." And now, four years later, I am very happy to be able to discuss these issues at the invitation of someone from that very region.

Danube River is a vital link for European states (both within and outside the EU). It provides a huge potential for territorial cooperation and sharing of projects and best practices at the local level. Interregional links aimed at tackling common challenges also help consolidate social and cultural cohesion and contribute to create a clear European Identity in the region which comprises both EU and non-EU countries. And this dimension of the strategy is very important. The cooperation with regions outside the EU is critical, not just for boosting the macro-region's economic competitiveness and cohesion, but also for developing the EU's external links and enlargement policy.

Given the importance of this project, in January 2009, the Committee of the Regions set up the "Danube" interregional group with 14 permanent members as a support for the Strategy. The Group aims:

- to promote a common identity for the Danube region in order to affirm its full potential;
- to work towards creating synergies and to raise the region's profile at national, regional and European levels; and
- to set up a Danube platform to facilitate the exchange of views, ideas and practices between CoR members and representatives of European institutions as well as non-EU riparian states.

Committee of the Regions considers the work so far on the Danube strategy in promoting cooperation both within the EU and with countries outside the EU is of immense political and strategic significance. Along with the Baltic Sea strategy, it blazes a trail by applying new approaches to cooperation and driving European integration forward.

I would like to particularly mention two suggestions, we as members of the Committee of the Regions, have insisted upon.

First, it is very important that the European Commission and the relevant stakeholders look into all options for simple and reliable financial support for priority area coordinators and horizontal action leaders as their cooperation in generating new project portfolios that help meet the strategy's objectives, is of critical importance.

Second, the issue we in the CoR have had most concerns of is governance. While the Commission has clarified the governance structures for the strategies and spelt out the tasks and responsibilities of the various players (such as national contact points, priority area coordinators, horizontal action leaders and flagship project leaders), governance is still seen as problematic according to the survey that it carried out.

Therefore, we have constantly urged the Commission and the Member States to consider ways of streamlining the current governance structures and further strengthen the role of the local and regional level. The European Commission and the Member States need to support the development of innovative governance systems and involve regions, municipalities, and European entities such as EGTCs and other territorial cooperation instruments such as working communities, in a real process of co-decision.

I would be happy to discuss these issues with you. Also, I believe that there are many parallels we could draw between the Danube Strategy and the Baltic Sea Strategy, in which my Member State participates, and I believe that this exchange of experiences is of critical importance.

Thank you.