EU STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION

FIRST CONTRIBUTION BY SLOVENIA

I. GENERAL

Since the launch of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the concept of macro-regional strategies has been gaining in importance as a modern and attractive type of closer cooperation. Closer and better coordinated cooperation at various levels of governance is undoubtedly a positive step towards a further deepening of European integration processes. Nevertheless, the introduction of new macro-regional strategies makes sense only insofar they entail an actual added value and give rise to the adoption of concrete action plans or projects.

Slovenia as an integral part of the Danube basin supports the preparation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. We believe that closer and more coordinated cooperation between the countries and other stakeholders in this part of Europe, based on concrete projects of wider interest, can in many ways contribute to sustainable development of the region and its competitiveness in a wider area. For this very reason, Slovenia intends to actively participate in the preparation and implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region is the first EU macro-regional strategy which extends well beyond the EU territory. Thus, one fifth of the Danube basin consists of the territory of the Western Balkan states and further 5% is made up by the territory of Ukraine and Moldova. Regardless of the fact that the Strategy is an EU document on development, we believe that its implementation cannot be effective without close cooperation with those countries of the Danube basin that are not (yet) members of the Union. In this context, Slovenia is particularly interested in closer cooperation with its neighbouring countries and the Western Balkans countries with which it has already established various forms of collaboration in the past.

Considering that a whole range of international sectoral strategies, bilateral agreements and other activities have already been devoted to the Danube region, the new Strategy should represent a logical framework of their implementation, which should be as efficient as possible and directed towards promoting sustainable-oriented development of the macro-region.

In addition to the initiative for the Danube Cooperation Process (DCP), several forms of institutionalised cooperation have a history of efficient cooperation in the Danube area, such as: the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR), the International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC), the Danube Commission, and numerous other associations at the non-governmental or sub-national level (e.g. the Alpe-Adria-Pannonia Working Community, Centre of Excellence in Finance – CEF). The new Strategy should certainly take into account their achievements and good practices.
The principle of financial and institutional neutrality is one of the fundamental principles governing the introduction of macro-regional strategies within the Union. The crucial feature of these strategies is namely not in establishing new institutions or looking for new ways of spending the EU budget, but in strengthening cooperation of the existing institutions and optimising the use of the available funds from the national, EU and other sources, both public and private. This principle has been backed by all EU Member States.

Considering the fact that the Strategy also covers third countries which are economically at a disadvantage in comparison with the rest of the countries in this macro-region, Slovenia welcomes the initiative for the organisation of a special conference to be held in autumn 2010, where international financial institutions would be invited to finance concrete projects of wider interest.

II. PRIORITY AREAS OF COOPERATION

Slovenia agrees with the initiative expressed by the European Commission that the EU Strategy for the Danube Region should be based on three principal pillars or headings under which several priority areas of cooperation should be agreed:

1. CONNECTIVITY AND COMMUNICATION

One of the key priorities of the Strategy is undoubtedly the improvement of the internal connectivity within the region and its connections to other macro-regions. The Strategy should not focus only on the improvement of the navigability of the Danube River and its key tributaries (e.g. the Sava River), but also on the modernisation of transport links along other transport corridors of European importance, such as trans-European Corridors V and X, and the increase in their connectivity within the European network TEN-T of inter-modal transport routes and logistic hubs. The future Transport Community Treaty between the EU and the Western Balkan countries and the existing bilateral agreements will, by all means, facilitate cooperation and the implementation of the Strategy in this area.

Due to variations in the pace at which the Danube countries proceed with their integration into the EU, Slovenia proposes that a Joint Operational Programme for developing a strategic transport network of the Danube countries should be elaborated. In this context, we propose that a joint international operative body be set up with the view to coordinating the work of the existing sectoral or branch international transport groupings in this area and, by raising funds from different sources in an organised and systematic way, significantly contribute to a more rapid development of transport connections and consequently to the development of the Danube countries.

For a successful development of the Danube region it is also necessary to ensure its long-term energy security and sustainability of the energy policy, as well as efficient functioning of market operations as provided for in the long-term goals of the EU energy policy. For this purpose, we must also concentrate on the Energy Community Treaty that institutionalises cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkan countries by means of transposing the energy acquis during the process of integrating the markets of the region into the EU energy market. In the future, the security of supply
in the Danube region will also depend on the regional incorporation of transit infrastructure projects, such as Nabucco, South Stream and Pan-European Oil Pipeline, as well as on the construction of an adequate network infrastructure in the region itself (e.g. Western Balkan Gas Ring, systems of electricity and gas transmission among the countries) and compliance with European energy infrastructure standards.

Improved interconnection and increased competitiveness cannot be imagined without good ICT connections. Joint projects and transfer of know-how and experience in this domain are an urgent prerequisite for the future development of any macro-region.

2. ENVIRONMENT, WATER AND RISK PREVENTION

The pursuit of the sustainable development principle should be one of the key principles of the Strategy. Long-term development of the region is inconceivable without environment protection as one of the crucial elements of sustainability, in particular water resources, biodiversity and comprehensive flood protection system. Relevant in this context are also the efficient fight against climate change and adequate adaptation to it, as well as the elimination of its negative consequences. Wholesome introduction of modern ‘green’ solutions through an integrated approach to planning, exchange of experiences, good practices and new technologies is the right way to a sustainable-oriented strategy. Moreover, this encompasses the reduction of health and environment risks arising from chemicals during their entire life cycle, including the solutions to the problem of obsolete pesticides and other obsolete chemicals as well as prevention of new risks of this kind in the future.

In 2010, when the preparation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is under way, Slovenia as the presiding country to the ICPDR will contribute actively to the preparation of the second pillar of the Strategy. One of the ICPDR concrete actions in this period is the commencement of the implementation of the Danube River Basin Management Plan (DRBMP) that will serve as the basis of the efficient implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) and of the EU Flood Directive in the whole river basin. As an active member of the Sava River Basin Commission and the depositary of the Framework Agreement on the Sava River Basin, Slovenia is especially interested in the enhancement of activities in the Sava basin that contribute to the achievement of the objectives laid down in the Danube Strategy at the sub-national level.

In order to achieve the goals of the climate-energy package of EU directives, Slovenia strives to maximise the comprehensive use of hydro-potential and waterways on the Sava and Mura rivers.

3. INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, HUMAN AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The establishment of closer cooperation and exchange of experiences and good practices at all levels of governance should be one of the key priorities of the Strategy. Intense communication among various stakeholders, respect for diversity and the enhancement of mutual trust are namely the fundamental prerequisites for a successful development of the region.
The EU Strategy for the Danube Region is a strategy for development. Considering the fact that the global financial and economic downturn has among all European countries most severely affected the Danube countries, the Strategy is also an opportunity to join our efforts in overcoming the crisis in a more coordinated way and by means of intercultural dialogue, and to exit the crisis with minimum consequences possible.

Beside economic cooperation, the above pillar comprises various forms of collaboration in the fields of innovation, research and development, social policy, education, culture (e.g. the implementation of both Ljubljana Processes), better governance, at the same time involving non-governmental organisations, local and regional communities. The Strategy should target further promotion of these forms of cooperation and communication, especially those that concern new technologies and innovative and creative forms of cooperation among citizens.

An important element of cooperation is also the transfer of know-how and experience in the field of management, e.g. management of public finance and central banking, or in the field of making and conducting medium-term fiscal and monetary policies of the countries of the region, where we have rich experience in the framework of the Centre of Excellence in Finance (CEF).

III. CONCRETE PROPOSALS FOR PRIORITY AREAS

The efficiency of the implementation of the Danube Strategy will be best measured by the success of concrete activities having tangible or beneficial effects for wider communities of citizens. Thus, Slovenia supports the preparation of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy with clearly defined priority areas of cooperation and including a list of agreed priority projects (especially those that are derived from the past activities and cooperation and promote integrated approach to the implementation of the adopted strategies, commitments, arrangements, and thus contribute to the implementation of the Strategy in the priority areas of cooperation), underlined importance of wider interest, reference to senior partners and other participants, timetable, and, where possible, clear financial breakdown.

In the light of the above, Slovenia proposes the following priority areas of cooperation under the Strategy (the Slovenian proposals for concrete projects of cooperation are expected to be submitted end of March 2010):

1. CONNECTIVITY AND COMMUNICATION

Priority area: Improvement of transport connectivity

Of utmost importance for the development of transport in the region are Corridors V and X. Corridor V connects not only the Danube countries, but also the whole region with the South-Western Europe. On the other hand, it provides the possibility to connect the region with Russia and Asia. Corridor X connects the South-Eastern Balkans with the Western Europe, while also providing the possibility of connecting Europe with Turkey and Middle Eastern countries. Both Corridors enable the
connection between the Danube region with the Adriatic Sea, the Ionian Sea, and the Black Sea. In the framework of these Corridors, considerable progress was made in the recent years with regard to the construction of highways, so that the Corridors connect all the countries in the region through road transport. The situation is rather different with regard to the more environment-friendly transport modes (railway and inland waterways), where the construction of modern infrastructure differs considerably between ‘the old’ EU Member States on the one hand and ‘the new’ EU Member States and third countries on the other hand. The latter should make a huge step forward in this area. Therefore, the following actions are required to achieve progress in this area:

− to speed up the completion of priority project No 6 (Corridor V: railway connection Lyon-Trieste-Divača/Koper-Divača-Ljubljana-Budapest-Ukrainian border) within the TEN-T network;

− in the new TEN-T policy for the period up to 2020, more attention should be paid to Corridor X (Salzburg-Ljubljana-Zagreb-Belgrade-Niš-Skopje-Veles-Thessaloniki), particularly with regard to railways and roads; the said Corridor represents a traditional transit route from the South-Eastern Balkan countries to the EU; this is especially important because the countries in the region share the aspiration to acquire membership of the EU;

− in the context of the ‘transport greening’ policy, navigability of rivers should be facilitated as much as possible, where appropriate from the environmental aspect. An important initiative in this field is the Sava River Basin Commission pursuing the aim of improving the navigability of the Sava River. In this context, Slovenia’s long-term goal is to develop a river port at the border-point between the Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Croatia, which could be possible if the navigability of the Sava river from the point where it flows into the Danube river to Brežice would be enabled;

− the implementation of the proposed Transport Community Treaty between the EU and the Western Balkan countries will contribute to the harmonisation of national legislations with the transport acquis; this will help provide equal conditions for carriers in the market and thus facilitate the EU-integration process. The signatories of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region should strive for an early adoption and ratification of the Treaty. Under this Treaty, the setting up of a permanent secretariat has been planned. Slovenia agrees that the seat of this secretariat should be located in one of the Western Balkan countries that is not an EU Member State;

− reduction of administrative barriers in crossing the borders could essentially shorten the travelling time; to this end, the countries should endeavour, while respecting the undertaken commitments, to conclude agreements which will shorten and unify the performance of border control procedures; there are many possibilities to do so, particularly in the railway transport.

**Priority area: Improvement of energy security in the region**

Long-term energy security and sustainable energy policy form the basis for any successful development of the region. Slovenia will continue to actively strive for the soonest implementation of the Energy Community Treaty. In addition to the latter, concrete cooperation in the region should focus on the construction of an adequate energy infrastructure relevant for the region. This includes:

− Construction of gas and oil infrastructures, such as the South Stream pipeline, the so-called Gas Ring, and the Pan-European Oil Pipeline (PEOP). The listed projects are of vital importance, both
for the Danube countries themselves and their connections with other macro-regions (Western Europe, Black Sea). In creating the so-called Balkan Gas Ring, we should not forget the role played by the Maribor Energy Community Gas Forum.

− Construction of the electricity transmission system connecting Slovenia and Hungary (transmission line 2 x 400 kV Cirkovce-Pince), vital for a more secure electricity supply for the whole region.

− Integral use of hydro-potential on the Sava River (enabling the navigability of the Sava upstream to Brežice) and possible hydro-power exploitation of the upper stream of the Mura River in the framework of a wholesome solution for the rehabilitation of dredging the river bed.

2. ENVIRONMENT, WATER AND RISK PREVENTION

**Priority area: Planning and construction of cross-border ‘Danube Corridors’**

Planning and construction of cross-border ‘Danube Corridors’, including the identification of floodplains and sustainable spatial planning and use of space, serve as the basis for the achievement of the goals set out in the *EU Water Framework Directive* and the *Flood Directive*. Such activities, which also concern the adaptation measures in response to the climate change, can only be performed on the condition that the Danube countries give their consent to the cross-border arrangements with all their technical solutions and that the regional and local communities on the territory of which the activities are to be performed agree thereon.

**Priority area: Cooperation in combating climate change**

For some time now, one of the most topical subjects in the international relations has been the climate change. The Danube countries differ one from another in their specificities and their commitments under the Kyoto Protocol and the climate-energy package of the EU. In spite of that or even thanks to it, the EU Member States and other countries in the Danube region have many possibilities of cooperation in managing the climate change.

As was the case with planning for the Baltic Sea region, the Danube countries could participate in the drafting of the Strategy and programmes for adaptation to the climate change. In most countries, the activities in this field have only started, while in some countries not even that.

**Priority area: Chemical safety**

In the context of the environment protection policy in the Danube countries, disposal of the old stockpiles of obsolete pesticides and other obsolete chemicals in the Danube basin area has been planned. This implies primarily the establishment of cooperation among countries, potential use of financial mechanisms, application of knowledge and technologies for an efficient action of disposing the old waste and, at the same time, the preparation of measures to prevent the creation of new burdens in the future.
An important area of cooperation under the proposed Strategy concerns the identification and joint action by the Danube countries in relation to substances classified under Regulation (EC) No 1907/2006 as carcinogenic, mutagenic and toxic for reproduction, certain toxic, persistent and bioaccumulable substances or substances identified as having endocrine disrupting properties, with the view to reducing and/or replacing these substances in a more efficient way.

3. INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE, SOCIO-ECONOMIC, HUMAN AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Priority area: Information society

The priority areas of closer cooperation in the Danube region should also include cooperation in the field of information society, concretely as follows:

- Implementation and exchange of good practices within the project of the COBISS.NET library system (Co-operative Online – Bibliographic System & Services) used by the library systems in the Danube region.
- Promotion of the so-called ‘Living Labs’ concept in the field of ICT innovative services aimed at strengthening the knowledge-based economy and of the quality of research and technological development in the region.

Priority area: Promotion and improvement of mobility in higher education in the region

One of the goals of the countries in the region in the field of higher education is also the enhancement of cooperation and support to greater participation of the Western Balkan countries and other third countries in the region in the existing programmes and mechanisms of mobility, mostly of students (enhancement of participation in the CEEPUS programme, EU programmes, direct cooperation of universities, university rectorship conferences, students etc.). In order to facilitate this, efforts have to be made towards eliminating barriers to mobility, especially in relation to the visa regime and the accessibility of study to third country citizens and improvement of study conditions.

Priority area: International cooperation in the fields of environmentally efficient economy, innovation and technology transfer in the region

In the emerging Danube region, it is necessary to:

- strengthen cooperation under the established EU mechanisms in the framework of the EUREKA initiative and the implementation of its programmes;
- strengthen cooperation of SMEs and big enterprises in the Danube region;
- encourage entrepreneurship among the young people and the exchange of young researchers in the economic field;
- strengthen cooperation in all priority areas by more intensely promoting the ‘green economy’;
enable more intense participation of the Danube countries in the EKO-INNO initiative, which is expected to encourage the implementation of new programmes and international calls for proposals in the field of eco-innovation and technological development.

**Priority area: Exchange of good practices in the field of entrepreneurship and competitiveness**

The priority areas of closer cooperation under the Strategy should also include the exchange of good practices in the field of entrepreneurship and competitiveness, such as:

- promotion of entrepreneurship and creativity among young people (e.g. introduction of entrepreneurship in the regular school system, activities aimed at promoting creativity and entrepreneurship among the youth outside the regular curriculum etc.);
- encouragement of female entrepreneurs;
- encouragement of the innovative potential of SMEs;
- encouragement of the inclusion of design in the work of enterprises (production and services).

**Priority area: Improvement of food security in the region**

By unifying technical standards and norms and consequently reducing technical barriers to trade in agricultural products, food security in the Danube region could be essentially improved. In this context, Slovenia has a vital interest in closer cooperation with other partners in the Danube region with regard to both the establishment of the food security system and the rural development in the wider sense.

**Priority area: Enhancement of scientific and technological cooperation in the region**

One of the objectives of cooperation in the Danube region should concern the optimisation and enhancement of bilateral and multilateral scientific and technological cooperation. In this context, Slovenia would like to stress the importance of strengthening cooperation in the following areas:

- construction and joint action regarding the important regional research infrastructure (regional cooperation under the ESFRI and within the ‘Salzburg Group’);
- development of human resources and mobility of researchers, lecturers and students in the region (strengthening bilateral and multilateral cooperation on the basis of calls for proposals, also under FP7, ERA-NET, COST, ESF etc.);
- encouragement of cooperation between the science and research sphere and the economy by transferring quality knowledge in the region (strengthening of bilateral and regional cooperation under programmes EUREKA, JTI, ETP, ESA etc.);
- improvement of the science governance in the region.

**Priority area: Promotion of intercultural dialogue**

Intercultural dialogue is a vital instrument of finding solutions to some of the major challenges our society faces today and a significant factor of fostering open and inclusive societies based on
fundamental European values. Relevant activities have already been under way in the Danube region; further cooperation in enhancing intercultural dialogue should build upon them:

- **Ljubljana Process**: the concluding phase of the IRPP/SAAH project that was launched in 2003 and has been jointly implemented by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. This project has proven how important it is to have an integrated approach to the cultural heritage management; it represents an incentive to build bridges among various ethnic and religious communities throughout the whole region, contributing to promotion of reconciliation, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue;

- **Balkan Incentive Fund for Culture**: Slovenia has been participating in this project as one of the partners; it intends to set up an information platform that would contain data on multicultural culture programmes and initiatives in the region, enable exchange of experiences and good practices and thus circulation of information;

- **Active participation in the Council of Ministers for the Culture of South-Eastern Europe**, a forum for cultural exchange based on the conviction that common cultural values, exchange of experience and heritage represent a unique instrument of maintaining peace, prosperity and co-existence in the region.

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