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(Resolutions, recommendations and opinions)

OPINIONS

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

81st PLENARY SESSION HELD ON 5-7 OCTOBER 2009

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions — ‘An EU strategy for the Danube area’

(2010/C 79/01)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- welcomes the fact that on 18-19 June 2009 the European Council requested the Commission to draw up an EU Strategy for the Danube Area by the end of 2010
- points out that an EU strategy for the Danube area will serve the goal of increasing prosperity, security and peace for the people who live there
- notes that the Danube area comprises both countries bordering the Danube and those which lie in the Danube catchment area; further notes that the Danube area consists of EU Member States, candidates for EU membership, potential candidates for EU membership and countries which are included in the European Neighbourhood Policy
- views regional and local authorities, as well as organisations with responsibility for regional development, as essential partners in any Danube strategy. These can make a major contribution by successfully developing the European Commission’s concept of territorial cohesion and cross-border cooperation. Stakeholders from business, academia, culture and environmental organisations, as well as institutions in society play an important role here
- regards the strategy policy areas of transport, environmental protection and energy security, the economy, security, education and culture, work, health and social affairs as central elements of an EU strategy for the Danube area
- notes that in order to exhaust its full economic, social, environmental and cultural potential, the Danube area should thus be viewed as a *single* transnational, European area of development.

Rapporteur: Professor Wolfgang Reinhart (DE/EPP), Minister for Federal and European Affairs, *Land of Baden-Württemberg*

I. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS:

1. welcomes the announcement by the European Commission at the Committee of the Regions plenary session held in Brussels on 8 October 2008 that the EU would draw up its own strategy for the Danube area, similar to the strategy that already exists for the Baltic Sea area ⁽¹⁾;

2. welcomes the fact that on 18-19 June 2009 the European Council requested the Commission to draw up an EU Strategy for the Danube Area by the end of 2010;

3. welcomes the setting up of a Danube area interregional group at the Committee of the Regions on 27 November 2008 and supports its work;

4. welcomes the attention paid by the European Parliament to the Danube area and the efforts to set up an inter-group at the European Parliament too ⁽²⁾;

5. points out that an EU strategy for the Danube area will serve the goal of increasing prosperity, security and peace for the people who live there. The entire European Union will benefit from this, including local and regional authorities;

6. notes that in a European Union that now has 27 Member States macro-regions are playing an increasingly important role, particularly for the EU's territorial cohesion;

7. notes that the Danube area comprises both countries bordering the Danube and those which lie in the Danube catchment area; further notes that the Danube area consists of EU Member States, candidates for EU membership, potential candidates for EU membership and countries which are included in the European Neighbourhood Policy;

8. underlines the European perspective of the Danube area; stresses at the same time the external dimension of the Danube area and emphasises that it can be a model for cooperation with third countries;

⁽¹⁾ European Commissioner calls for European Danube strategy IP/08/1461.

⁽²⁾ Written declaration by Victor Bostinaru and Daciana Octavia Sârbu on setting up a working group with a view to drawing up and implementing a Danube strategy; PE422.681v01-00; submitted on 23 March 2009.

9. points out the far-reaching political, economic and social reforms which have taken place in the Danube area since the fall of the Iron Curtain. For this reason, the European Commission has included these changes as a subject for its 2009 work programme ⁽³⁾ and in its communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Central Bank, entitled, 'Five Years of an enlarged EU – Economic Achievements and Challenges' ⁽⁴⁾;

10. acknowledges the supporting role of the Danube area at European level, the continued efforts to promote democracy and the rule of law in this area and supports in particular non-EU countries in the Danube area on their path towards democratic development;

11. believes that cooperation at regional and local level in implementing the European principles of subsidiarity, proximity and partnership has a major role to play as does responsible governance in third countries, and refers to the added value of regional and local cooperation in the Danube area in further preparing accession countries and potential accession countries for EU membership;

12. emphasises the traditional cultural and historical ties throughout the entire Danube area and underlines the contribution of regional and local authorities in this field in particular;

13. takes account of existing international, national, regional and local cooperation, networks and institutions which are active within and for the Danube area and points out that their experience and knowledge should be taken into account in the dialogue with the European institutions;

14. supports the European Commission in its efforts to forge effective and comprehensive relations with neighbouring countries and establish tailor-made political and economic relations with individual regions and partners;

⁽³⁾ Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Commission Legislative and Work Programme 2009. Acting now for a better Europe; COM(2008) 712 final.

⁽⁴⁾ Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Central Bank: Five Years of an Enlarged EU. Economic Achievements and Challenges; COM(2009) 79 final.

15. underlines the particular importance, the role and the responsibility of the Danube area which consists of EU Member States, EU accession candidates, potential accession candidates and countries which are included in the European Neighbourhood Policy. This area acts as an important interface between the EU's cohesion policy programmes, measures for accession candidates and potential accession candidates as well as programmes for countries included in the European Neighbourhood Policy;

16. emphasises the political role of the Committee of the Regions in the strategic framework which helps to dovetail the European Commission's European Neighbourhood Policy with an EU strategy for the Danube area. The Committee of the Regions is familiar with local needs and thus can assess the impact of such measures and programmes on the ground very effectively;

17. underlines the importance of the recognition of the Danube macro-region by the European cohesion policy and emphasises its role for future territorial development across the EU and the neighbouring countries, in the same way that the Baltic Sea and Black Sea regions are recognized;

18. sees the content of the EU strategy for the Baltic Sea region in particular as a model for the Danube area. Both macro-areas are promoting the integration of former communist countries into the European Union and cooperation with third countries. Both areas are examples of how internal EU strategies can be dovetailed with cooperation with non-EU countries. In this regard, it is also worth referring to the experience of the European Neighbourhood Policy implemented by the outermost regions together with surrounding third countries;

II. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

EU strategy for the Danube area:

19. considers the request of the European Council to the Commission to draw up an EU Strategy on the Danube area by the end of 2010 to be an acknowledgment of the importance of the Danube area for the future development of the EU and for its relations with neighbouring states, and calls on the Commission to involve regional and local authorities and institutions in preparing the strategy, to respect the responsibilities of Member States and regional and local authorities and their internal division of powers during implementation and to use existing institutions, reporting obligations and monitoring processes;

20. views regional and local authorities, as well as organisations with responsibility for regional development, as essential partners in any Danube strategy. These can make a major contribution by successfully developing the European Commission's concept of territorial cohesion and cross-border cooperation. Stakeholders

from business, academia, culture and environmental organisations, as well as institutions in society play an important role here;

21. draws attention to the fact that regional and local authorities, together with regional development agencies and bodies, which on account of their proximity to the public are very familiar with the needs and concerns of citizens, have a central role to play in planning, implementing and further developing an EU strategy for the Danube area, as announced by the European Commission;

22. stresses the importance of the Danube area's development as a major element in the successful European integration of the countries, regions, municipalities and people in this area, and supports the European Parliament, the European Council as well as the European Commission in their efforts to push ahead with this integration;

23. supports the fact that the Stability Pact for south-eastern Europe has been changed into a regional cooperation network (Regional Cooperation Council, RCC), which works within the overall framework of the South-East Europe Cooperation Process (SEEC). This regional reference comes in useful for the specific needs and requirements of the Danube area;

Strategic policy areas

24. regards the strategy policy areas of transport, environmental protection and energy security, the economy, security, education and culture, work, health and social affairs as central elements of an EU strategy for the Danube area;

25. refers to the major regional differences in economic performance in the Danube area and views the inclusion of the Danube area in the European Commission's work priorities for 2010 and the perception of the Danube area as a single major unit as prerequisites for further integration and sustainable economic development of the region;

Transport

26. urges the European Commission, in line with the EU's sustainability strategy, to take account of the special role of the Danube as a Europe-wide transport and route and waterway with a promising future, which has the capacity to relieve congestion significantly on other European transport routes. The development of infrastructure, both on water and on land, helps the entire region to use its role as a link between west and east and north and south and above all to improve its own competitiveness;

27. advocates rapid implementation of TEN-T infrastructure projects since they will make a lasting contribution to ensuring that the Danube region is linked up more effectively with existing European transport routes and that the Danube countries are better connected with one another; urges the participating local and regional authorities in this connection to also come up with proposals for solutions to longstanding problems and bottlenecks and to implement them within the framework of sustainable development;

28. stresses that transport and environmental protection should not be mutually exclusive, but on the contrary must go hand in hand; emphasises that the sustainable development of the Danube area should be the overriding goal and that the guiding principles of the joint statement on 'Development of Inland Navigation and Environmental Protection in the Danube River Basin' adopted by the Danube Commission, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) and the International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC) should be applied;

Environmental protection and energy security

29. points out that cross-border cooperation is essential for the sake of the environment, joint efforts to tackle the impact of climate change and flood protection;

30. believes that the countries of the Danube area have an important role to play in energy security and stresses the role of the Danube as a natural, renewable energy source offering valuable hydroelectric power potential. The use of this source should be especially promoted wherever there is scope for reconciling the environment and the economy;

31. refers in this connection to conventions such as the one on cooperation and protection and sustainable use of the Danube river (Danube River Protection Convention establishing the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) ⁽⁵⁾), which came into force in 1998 and the Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians (the Carpathian Convention). The Joint Statement on Guiding Principles for the Development of Inland Navigation and Environmental Protection in the Danube River Basin ⁽⁶⁾ is a good example of this cooperation;

32. calls on Member States and local and regional authorities in the Danube area, as well as organisations with responsibility for regional development, to contribute to environmental programmes promoted by the European Commission, such as the LIFE⁺ programme (redevelopment of rivers and riverside systems), the European Territorial Cooperation Programmes (ETC), as well as the Intelligent Energy Europe (IEE) programme to foster local energy networking projects among local authorities in the area;

33. points out that measures to implement the water framework directive should also help to maintain fish stocks over the long term. Fish stocks in the Danube system are very diverse, comprise many endemic species of fish and are therefore especially in need of protection;

34. stresses the importance of sustainable Community plans for tourism. For instance, the countries of the Danube area could increase cooperation on implementing the Espoo ⁽⁷⁾, Aarhus ⁽⁸⁾ and Bern conventions ⁽⁹⁾. The example of the Danube cycle path highlights the benefit of such cooperation for all stakeholders;

35. regards, in particular, an exchange of experience in these fields between regional and local authorities, as well as organisations with responsibility for regional development, as useful for the overall development of the Danube area. With their specialist skills and local knowledge, these authorities can ensure the sound implementation of common projects. Joint government agreements and cooperation, which many countries and regions in the Danube area undertake among themselves, indicate the form that targeted cooperation might take;

The economy

36. points out that the Danube should be seen as a vector for the further economic development of the region. This applies for example to the linking-up of water and land routes, as well as harbours and economic centres located in the region;

37. refers to the importance of cross-border projects which help to overcome the economic isolation of border regions and enables them to enhance their competitiveness and stability;

38. notes that the regions and municipalities have a key role to play in supporting the establishment of contact between small and medium-sized enterprises;

39. believes that efforts by non-governmental organisations, economic and social stakeholders and regional and local authorities to further promote cross-border and transnational projects play a central role. It should be ensured here that the synergies between cross-border, transnational and inter-regional territorial cooperation programmes (Objective 3) and Objective 1 and 2 programmes are used. They enable countries, regions and municipalities within the Danube area but outside the European Union to be brought closer to the EU and, in particular, make it possible to explain the Community's values of democracy and the rule of law to people locally; attaches particular importance to increased cooperation in the areas of technological transfer and research, on the basis of existing potential (human resources, infrastructure) with a view to achieving the sustainable economic development of the Danube area;

⁽⁵⁾ Convention on cooperation and protection and sustainable use of the Danube River; adopted in Sofia on 29 June 1994.

⁽⁶⁾ http://www.icpdr.org/icpdr-pages/navigation_and_ecology_process.htm.

⁽⁷⁾ Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context, adopted in Espoo on 25 February 1991.

⁽⁸⁾ Convention on Access to Environmental Information, Public Participation in Environmental Decision-making and Access to Justice, adopted in Aarhus on 25 June 1998.

⁽⁹⁾ Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, adopted in Bern on 19 September 1979.

40. invites the competent national authorities, in the Danube area countries, to take the appropriate steps for allowing participation of local and regional authorities in future EGTCs, as allowed by the Regulation (EC) 1082/2006;

Security

41. recalls that the Danube is a very busy river which will probably become even busier in future, and underlines therefore the importance of measures to increase transport safety;

42. refers in this connection to the Belgrade Convention ⁽¹⁰⁾ which regulates navigation on the Danube;

43. calls on countries bordering the Danube to continue their joint efforts to tackle all forms of cross-border crime, but in particular organised crime, drug smuggling, illegal immigration and human trafficking;

44. stresses the importance of environmental safety as an important aspect of security, particularly with regard to preventing cross-border pollution and flooding;

Education and culture

45. stresses the role of regional and local authorities in promoting intercultural dialogue. Given their often heterogeneous populations, cities and regions are especially suited to supporting intercultural and inter-religious dialogue through their direct experiences;

46. refers to the bridge function of regional cultural work with home regions and regions of origin in countries bordering the Danube as a way of promoting coalescence in Europe;

47. points to the importance of extending twinning, for example on the DonauHanse® network. This is an important measure for implementing the European motto of 'Unity in diversity' by involving the public directly in the European Union. Mutual dialogue contributes not only to the removal of intercultural prejudices, it also forms the framework for economic and social cooperation and sustainable development and thus promotes the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy goals;

48. refers to the fact that institutions such as the European Danube Academy, the Gyula Andrassy university in Budapest or the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) can play an important role by consolidating existing potential and developing new target groups;

Work, health and social matters

49. views the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010) and the European Year of Volunteering (2011) as an opportunity to point out that the economic development of the Danube area must be accompanied by social development if society is to become persuaded of the benefits of the European Union for all citizens;

50. thanks all stakeholders for ensuring the exchange of experience with governmental and non-governmental organisations in the Danube area with a view to accelerating development on social and health matters and requests that they continue to provide this support at all levels;

A single EU development area

51. notes that the development of competitive and sustainable regions as part of the process of globalisation and in view of the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy goals will play an increasingly important role;

52. points out that in the current 2007-2013 development period the Danube area is split into two partly overlapping transnational development areas: Central Europe and Southeast Europe. The division of the former single development area of Central and Southeast Europe into the Baltic Sea and the Aegean (CADES) can, particularly in the Danube area, have a long-term counterproductive effect on territorial, social and economic cohesion. Given its special geographical and cultural and historical importance especially for cohesion between eastern and western Europe, the Danube area has a special political and strategic spatial dimension. In light of its geopolitical importance, this can be best taken into account in a single area of cooperation;

53. notes that in order to exhaust its full economic, social, environmental and cultural potential, the Danube area should thus be viewed as a *single* transnational, European area of development. A single EU development area would ensure that:

- The potential of this area can be used effectively, especially in the strategic policy fields of infrastructure, waterways, flood protection, energy and energy security, sustainable economy as well as environmental policy
- The joint economic potential can be fully and sustainably exploited
- The path of cooperation can be further pursued at national, regional and local level

⁽¹⁰⁾ Agreement on regulating shipping in the Danube; adopted in Belgrade on 18 August 1948.

— The Danube area can be viewed as the shared cultural, natural and historical heritage of all of Europe;

54. calls on the European institutions to treat the Danube area as a single transnational EU development area in the next development phase. The IPA and ENPI instruments are flexible tools aimed at fully integrating candidate and potential candidates for

EU membership as well as third countries into the whole of the development area. Further development here will ensure the coherent development of the Danube area. In this connection, it should be actively examined whether the Commission's responsibility for the ERDF, IPA and ENPI development instruments and for the ETC programmes can be consolidated and carried out exclusively by a single Commission service.

Brussels, 7 October 2009.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE
