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EU Strategy for the Danube Region – Bridging the gap between national and European policies

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Introduction

Integration policies and trends have made international affairs increasingly complex over the course of last few decades. We are witnessing the development of a number of sub-regional, regional, European and global institutions and organisations. This directly influences decision-making at the multilateral level, increasing the number of layers and stakeholders in the process, thus giving broader diversity and multidimensionality to newly created political entities. Especially in the process of

European integration, policy-making powers and processes have been transferred from the national to the supranational/European level. In this context, while some policies were made at the national level and others were transferred to the European one, there were numerous issues ‘in between’ where coordinated policies were needed. The gaps were filled with different sub-regional and regional initiatives, covering a wide range of different issues and being guided by a variety of different consensual

decision-making procedures. However, this has not dealt with issues related to wider regions, geographically determined by an important natural phenomena or an ecosystem. The EU attempted to respond to this challenge by developing macro-regional strategies. The first one was the Baltic Sea Region Strategy from 2009, followed by the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), adopted by the European Commission in 2010 and endorsed by the European Council in 2011, along with the Adriatic Ionian Strategy from 2014 and the Alpine Region Strategy from 2015. All of these strategies are presently being developed in the wider EU policy framework as a new concept of territorial governance.

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Namely, the Lisbon Treaty from 2009 already defines 'territorial cohesion' as one of EU's priorities in the contemporary European affairs. New policy-making structures and different political and economic contexts are supposed to stimulate interest for enhanced trans-border cooperation which should yield policy solutions for the macro-region and specific issues that could not be appropriately tackled by the means of national and European policies alone. Although the concept leaves many questions

unanswered at this stage, it shows a noticeable capacity to develop in the appropriate direction and bridge the gap between national and European policy-making in specific macro-regions, which deserves the attention of policy analysts. Therefore, this brief will focus on the phenomena of EU macro-regional strategies, with the particular attention paid to the Danube region strategy.

The phenomena and its concept

While there are different attempts to consolidate the concept of EU macro-regional strategies and to offer viable interpretations and explanations, there is barely any widely accepted definition of the term.

A macro-region is an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges.

Taking into account the diversity of approaches to the concept, but keeping in mind the necessity to have one at least as an operational framework, this text will opt for a definition endorsed by former EU Commissioner for Regional Policy, Pawel Samecki, which was developed during the drafting process of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region: 'an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated

with one or more common features or challenges'. While the definition does not carry an implication of scale, as Stefanie Dühr, an expert on spatial planning recognises, it does have 'both a territorial and a functional dimension. From a territorial perspective, it implies a number of nation-states and regions are involved, thus requiring co-operation across national borders. Furthermore, the extension of macro-region does not have to be identical with the administrative borders of nation states but can cover just parts of those. The functional dimension of the concept suggests that in the first instance the macro-regional concept is based on large natural or landscape systems, such as the ecosystems of the Baltic Sea and the Danube river and on the interlinkages between territories resulting from this this shared ecosystem and other economic and social connections.' The framework for the geographical determination of a macro-region is defined in a flexible manner which allows the extension of cooperation with countries beyond the natural ecosystem itself. Accordingly, it is clear that the emphasis is on a multi-functional integrated approach that should provide different opportunities to pinpoint requirements and employ obtainable means by way of increased transnational harmonisation of policies.

A macro-regional strategy for the Danube basin

The Danube is, without a doubt, one of most important rivers in the EU and beyond. With more

than 800 thousand km² and almost 3000 km in length, it represents the second largest river basin of the Old Continent, connecting 19 countries and 115 million inhabitants. Especially after consecutive waves of EU enlargement over the last 15 years to Eastern and Southeastern Europe, covering more than 20% of the EU's territory, the Danube basin directly affects the prosperity of the entire Union. This is precisely why the European Commission decided to draft a Strategy, acting upon the request of countries from the region and formally from the European Council, in an attempt to respond to existing challenges. And those challenges are numerous and substantial, ranging from a post-socialist legacy with underdeveloped infrastructure and economic disparities, to problems with migration, environmental protection, security and crisis management in particular. For example, issues like wildfires, storms and in particular floods, require a transnational and coordinated response. The region's geographical and political determinants only add to the existing complexity of issues at stake in this macro-region.

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The framework for administrative and political cooperation in this form, which covers various topical units in a coherent and structured way, was a novelty to the wider Danube Region

especially taking into account the fact that it was followed by the development of an action plan. The entire process preceding the drafting of the Strategy was very inclusive and transparent, which encouraged the public to take a sizeable role in the consultation process. This helped bring about four basic priorities that were set as pillars (priority areas) of the document. They are as follows: connecting the Danube Region, protecting the environment in the Danube Region, building prosperity in the Danube Region and strengthening the Danube Region. Each pillar encompasses a few priority areas with developed activities that should yield concrete achievements.

The first pillar – connecting the Danube Region – focuses on three priority areas: to improve mobility and multimodality, to encourage more sustainable energy, and to promote culture, tourism and people to people contacts. This strategy recognises the essential role of good connections for the Danube Region, both internally and to other European and global regions. Its current state reflects many infrastructural gaps and deficiencies, primarily related to a lack of capacity and overall quality, as well as to inadequate maintenance. Additionally, it shows signs of market failures and a lack of cross-border investment as an additional burden for the region, which requires coordinated planning, funding and implementation of transnational projects.

The second pillar – protecting the environment in the Danube Region – also focuses on three priority areas: to restore and maintain the quality of waters, to manage environmental risks, and to preserve diversity, landscapes and quality of air and soil. This strategy underlines the fact that environmental resources are shared across borders and go beyond national interests. This also very much exemplifies a macro-region in focus due to the fact that it contains an extraordinary and diverse display of flora and fauna, mountainous regions and river valleys. However, uncontrolled industrial development over the course of the last few decades, desertification and contamination are creating severe difficulties for the region, requiring additional efforts for cross-border cooperation.

The third pillar – building prosperity in the Danube Region – also focuses on three priority areas: to develop knowledge society through research, education and information technologies, to support the competitiveness of enterprises, including cluster development, and to invest in people and skills. This strategy pinpoints sizeable differences in economic and social conditions throughout the macro-region, stemming from highest to lowest living standards and level of education. It aims at bridging these gaps by keeping an eye on the Europe 2020 Strategy, which matches capital-rich with labour-rich and the technologically-

advanced with waiting markets, through widening knowledge-based society and inclusiveness.

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The fourth pillar – strengthening the Danube Region – focuses on two priority areas: to step up institutional capacity and cooperation, and to work together to promote security and tackle organised and serious crime. This strategy recognises different political backgrounds of countries and stages of post-socialist and post-conflict consolidation in the wider macro-region, as well as democratic deficits and security challenges that are derived from that fact. Issues like democracy, respect for rule of law, transparency and human rights are not equally enforced throughout the Danube basin and this requires joint efforts that should yield concrete improvements in that regard, leading to the long term consolidation of the entire area.

The implementation of this strategy is the responsibility of all stakeholders at different levels (regional, national, local), which should make their actions complementary, utilising readily available infrastructure, resources and

policies in the best possible way. In order to offer political support to the implementation of the Strategy, the European Commission will strengthen EU policies and their visibility, as well as the implementation of existing legislation in the Danube region. A rational and cost-effective approach to the entire macro-region is highlighted in the Strategy with three no's: no new EU funds, no new EU legislation and no new EU structures. Namely, the document emphasizes better use of existing funds and institutional structures, while the EU regulation applies to the whole EU and not for the macro-region only.

Conclusion

The increasing level of complexity of contemporary European affairs, that encompass different levels and layers of polity, is energizing debates about multi-level governance systems, giving justification to the relatively new concept of macro-regional strategies in the EU, and reflecting the necessity to articulate policies 'between national and the EU level of decision-making'. In the case of the Danube region, the Strategy is the first endeavour that aims at developing an inclusive and extensive web of stakeholders from various policy areas. In other words, this comprehensive platform is designed to connect, integrate and improve existing avenues of cooperation.

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Nevertheless, the practical implementation of a wider list of interesting ideas provided by the Strategy proved to be easier said than done. First of all, the diversity of political backgrounds of countries in the Danube basin implies challenges to structures of state administrations of those less prepared and capable when it comes to the absorption of allocated funds, but also differences in the functionality and efficiency of decision-making procedures which directly influence the capacity of states to equally participate in the newly created platform of macro-regional cooperation. Furthermore, while a flexible and fairly informal framework of cooperation that is not burdened with clear decision-making competences makes way for compromise-building among national representatives of different countries, it also deprives it from mechanisms that could enforce the implementation of taken obligations. Therefore, the success of this framework depends entirely on the commitment of stakeholders, primarily at the national level, but also at the regional and local one.

However, it has to be taken into account that this platform utilises vertical and horizontal aspects of a multi-layered system of governance, which ‘empowers’ it to affect strategic decisions and project implementation at different levels. This process fosters closer comprehension of policy management at the EU level and its main determinants, hence improving the capacity at the national level to benefit from different forms of regional cooperation and available funds. In the long run, it prepares them for an increasingly complex and multifaceted system of governance that is being gradually developed and is likely to become even more complicated soon. It also offers an opportunity to pool and share experiences and capacities which could increase possibilities to foster synergy and yield joint projects and concrete improvements in respective fields of joint concern.

The success of the cooperation in the framework of the Danube Region Strategy and beyond will depend almost exclusively on the political will and dedication of all relevant stake-holders.

As stated by the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, the ecosystems of the Danube River Basin are

highly valuable in environmental, economic, historical and social terms, but they are subject to increasing pressure and serious pollution from agriculture, industry and cities. Other than that, the macro-region faces severe developmental challenges, but also those related to security and organised crime. These challenges cannot be tackled individually even by leading global players. Consequentially, countries in the wider Danube macro-region are destined to cooperate in various challenging fields that were earmarked above. However, the success of their cooperation in the framework of the Danube Region Strategy and beyond will depend almost exclusively on the political will and dedication of all relevant stake-holders.

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