

## **National Position on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region**

The Slovak Republic welcomes the decision of the European Council of June 2009 on the preparation of an EU Strategy for the Danube Region (the Danube Strategy). We see the preparation and implementation of strategies for the comprehensive and sustainable development of the regions of the European Union as the correct approach to the problem of regional development provided that the affected regions and their responsible authorities are involved in the preparation of such strategies. Such an approach will lead to stronger ownership of the principles, objectives and implementation measures of the strategy.

The Danube region and the Danube itself represent a unique natural, economic and transport phenomenon, which is linked to the sovereignty of the stakeholder countries and regions. It is a region that brings together “old” EU member states and those that have recently undergone economic and social transformation and become EU members just a few years ago. It is a symbolic and real space for the unification of Europe along its east–west axis after the fall of the “iron curtain” and the solution of persistent problems.

From ancient times a river has been a symbol of the constant movement of life. It drives settlement, transport, energy production, various types of business and services, trade, agriculture, cultural and social ties and of course natural wealth. The Danube is the largest river in Europe and its potential is not fully exploited in all of the above areas, a situation which the Danube Strategy can help to rectify.

The Danube Strategy should seek to create a mechanism embodying the collective responsibility of the countries in the Danube region for the economic and social development of the Danube countries and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. After the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty it may be the first large European project promoting unification in the interests of the development needs and priorities of states, regions and communities, which will benefit Europe as a whole. Coordinating the response of countries, regions and civil society to common problems of the Danube and its riparian territories in accordance with principles of transparency and communication between all stakeholders will enable them to find more effective and cost-efficient solutions and help them to take full advantage of the unprecedented potential of the Danube region.

The most important point in the Slovak Republic’s position on the Danube Strategy is to emphasise and promote an integrated approach to the development of the Danube basin. An integrated approach means that the approach to each priority must equally respect the interests of all participating states and must take the other priorities into consideration. It is also important that the development of the Danube Strategy take into consideration the existing geopolitical, natural and development strategies in the regions adjoining the River Danube.

Although the majority of the countries in the Danube Region are members of the European Union and the development of Danube Strategy has been inaugurated by the European Council and is coordinated by the European Commission, Slovakia considers the inclusion of the non-member states in the preparation and implementation of the strategy to be both necessary and desirable. We see the participation of the non-member states in the new EU macro-strategy as an indubitable stimulus to the development of states both outside and inside the European Union.

The Slovak Republic identifies with the main pillars of the Danube Strategy as proposed by the European Commission:

1. Transport and connectivity (access to the Danube etc.)
2. Water (environment, biodiversity, emergency response, e.g. in case of floods)
3. Socio-economic development (economic and cultural cooperation etc.)

The goals and activities that the Slovak Republic will promote for each pillar in the preparation of the Danube Strategy are as follows:

## **1. Infrastructure as the basis of connectivity**

### **Transport infrastructure**

One of the key priorities that the Slovak Republic believes the Danube Strategy should reflect is the development of transport infrastructure, in particular **the development of the continuous Danube waterway in its original channel** and measures to ensure the navigability of the Danube in a manner that respects principles of sustainable development. We consider water transport to be one of the best forms for transport in Europe in terms of its environmental, energy efficiency and social characteristics. In this regard, the development of personal and goods transport by water should be integrated with the network of waterways linking western and eastern Europe and should be in line with the parameters for efficient navigation of the Danube recommended by the Danube Commission and the UNECE (the Blue Book and the AGN Agreement). Plans should allow for the removal of obstructions to navigation and of differences in the level of use of the potential of inland water transport between the western and eastern parts of Europe and the creation of conditions for north-south transport connections based on water transport. Inland navigation needs to be exploited as means of promoting the economic development of towns and harbours in the Danube space and its regions so that they can become strong logistics nodes providing extensive auxiliary services.

One of the priorities for the development of the Danube waterway is the development of **multimodal corridors in the Danube region**. Intermodal transport could be a good and cost-effective solution that would relieve the roads in the region from lorry traffic that has a harmful effect on the environment and public health and perform the function of the necessary back-up corridor to the rail network.

In this context a useful project could be the development of a **Transcontinental Transit Terminal**, creating a hub for all forms of transport, in particular those that offer the best growth prospects: air, rail and water. Nearby motorways and first-class roads in this location will complement the above forms of infrastructure in the transport system. The Transcontinental Transit Terminal is probably the most efficient and most comprehensive way to link the five types of transport. The transit function will improve conditions for the emergence of new industries to support the development of trade and finance and stimulate the development of regions in central and eastern Europe. Implementing this project will establish a centre for transit, logistics and trade, which could be extended to create a centre for development and education for all types of transport and logistics, intelligent transport systems and relevant information technology.

The development of transport infrastructure must incorporate direct connections with the main transport corridors (road, rail, water (e.g. ferries across the Danube), air or cycle paths). **Construction of additional transportation infrastructure in the regions**, exploitation of synergies with navigation of tributaries of the Danube, construction and reconstruction of public harbours on the Danube and its navigable tributaries that improve international and regional communications should be complementary but essential elements of a strategy for achieving integrated connectivity in the Danube region.

Connectivity between all parts of the region will stimulate all aspects of the development of towns and villages in the region and increase their competitiveness and solidarity.

To increase social and economic development it is also necessary to improve **connectivity between regions**, in particular access to crossings of the Danube and transport networks on the pan-European level. Priority areas will include regional airports for low-cost carriers, key rail and road corridors and water transport. Great attention must be given to the creation of a flexible combined transport network to facilitate the rapid, cost-effective and environmentally-friendly transport of labour and goods. It will be necessary to continue the rapid construction of telecommunication networks in the region.

### **Energy infrastructure**

At a time when nearly the whole of the European Union faces the problem of energy security and ensuring reliable supplies of raw materials for energy production, the Slovak Republic sees the River Danube as a an **important transport corridor for the supply of raw materials for energy production** and also a potential **source of clean, renewable energy**. The energy security of Slovakia and the European Union and the environmental conditions for the development of EU member states depend on the development of this strategy.

The energy security of the region could be increased by the construction of plants that **make use of energy flows or geothermal energy** while respecting the interests of environmental protection. Greater use of the potential for hydroelectric power generation from the Danube and its tributaries would contribute to the diversification of energy sources and help to meet commitments for reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Environmental impact assessments must be carried out for the design and construction of hydroelectric projects in order to minimise the risk to the environment in accordance with European legislation. It is also necessary to focus efforts on increasing the efficiency of the use of water energy in existing plants and their functioning as high performance plants where possible.

In order to increase the energy security of the states in the Danube region it is necessary to ensure the **compatibility and connectivity of national energy networks**.

## **2. Water (the environment, biodiversity, flood prevention)**

Support for economic activity exploiting the potential of the River Danube and its catchment area must conform to ecological standards. It is essential to devote adequate attention to the **protection and sustainable use of ecosystems** including environmentally friendly management of riparian forests and **the protection of the biological diversity of the region**.

The rational use and conservation of natural resources is unquestionable. To ensure this, it is necessary to create a mechanism and increase dialogue between business and stakeholders in environmental protection.

Particular attention must be given to issues relating to **the protection of water quality, increasing the yield of water sources** and creating conditions for access to quality drinking water from underground sources and the cleaning of waste water. This would satisfy one of the conditions for ensuring sustainable, responsible access to the largest European source of quality subsurface water under Žitný Ostrov (Great Rye Island), which is of importance for the whole of central Europe. A priority for the new member states in coming years will be to promote the use of “ecological technologies” in manufacturing, the construction of waste water treatment plants and the construction of alternative systems for purifying waste water in rural communities with a population equivalent of less than 2 000. This approach makes it possible to select and implement an optimal solution for each area in technical, economic and social terms. The social aspect includes the ability of the rural population to finance the operation of the implemented waste water treatment system.

The Danube is an international river and it is important that all the countries through which it flows share in the protection of the water in the Danube basin (both underground and surface water), biodiversity and adjacent ecosystems. This requires a combination of **sustainable land use** and efficient management of water and soil, protection of biodiversity and flood prevention. The protection of the environment in the lands along the Danube requires that all riparian states concentrate on prevention through the relocation or elimination of sources of river pollution, the regeneration of flood plains and wetlands, the revitalisation of damaged landscape structure, the application of protection and appropriate maintenance and sustainability for riparian forests, increased retention potential in the landscape.

An integrated approach to the use of the Danube will also include improvement in resources for **flood prevention**, improvement in the common information system on flow rates and increased sharing of information that can be used in hydrological forecasting. A specific problem is the precise forecasting of hydrological crises, which have resulted in loss of life practically everywhere in central and eastern Europe. It would be desirable for the riparian states of the Danube to promote the development of the necessary methodology within the EU and to be able to implement it in areas in which storm flooding occurs and to apply the principles of integrated management of water sources and land. Flood prevention should also be based on flood prevention measures for sections of the Danube on the national and supranational levels.

It is necessary to support the putting into practice of pilot and model projects and approaches to **integrated river management**, which can be subsequently extended and broadened to apply to population centres and whole catchment areas.

### **3. Socio-economic development**

#### **The tourism industry**

The development of transport infrastructure in a way that respects all aspects of the environment will facilitate the development of sustainable models for the **tourism industry**,

which the Slovak Republic considers to be an important resource for strengthening informal social ties between the inhabitants of the countries in the region. Support for tourism in the Danube region brings with it not only opportunities to reinforce intercultural dialogue and a not insignificant stimulus for the development of small and medium enterprises and overall economic development, especially in border areas, but also a richer and fuller life for the population.

We consider the following actions desirable in this area:

- The creation of combined integrated tourism products for shared attractions in border areas (cultural and historic monuments, natural and intellectual heritage, joint events, creation of an information network) with the aim of developing a major European tourist destination in the Danube basin;
- Intensifying and extending cooperation (domestic and cross-border) between villages, towns, regions and businesses along the Danube;
- Shared use of infrastructure to facilitate tourism (e.g. navigation routes on the Danube, cycle route beside the Danube connected to other routes in adjoining regions);
- Creation of a network for destination management and joint marketing activities in the development of cultural initiatives to support a pro-active approach to cultural diversity and innovative tourism products, identification of common target groups and target markets;
- Development of countryside tourism and agro-tourism as environmentally and socially beneficial forms of tourism at a local and regional level;

### **Cultural development**

The Danube region is an important space for the meeting of different cultures and nationality. Successfully achieving the goals and the spirit of the Danube Strategy requires measures to support the preservation of the region's diverse cultural heritage and the conservation of its cultural and historical monuments, **the development of cultural dialogue**, mutual understanding and comprehension, particularly in a cross-border context.

A plan that could help to achieve such objectives is the plan to establish a Danube cultural festival in Bratislava which, like the Edinburgh Festival, would provide a forum for the presentation of artists and arts groups of different nationalities and cultures in the Danube region. The cultural development of regions, the overcoming of social exclusion and the lack of jobs in regions that are lagging behind require an emphasis on mapping the cultural potential of population centres and regions, on increasing added value through participation in the regional and local market for tourist services and products or programmes for the conservation of cultural heritage and the revitalisation of landscape, including the conservation and application of the intangible cultural heritage of the various communities, nationalities and ethnic groups in the Danube Region.

The problem of inclusion of marginalised Roma communities is a grave social and economic problem in many countries in the Danube region but also an example of a meeting of cultures. An effective and sustainable solution of this problem will require concentrated efforts and commitments of human and financial resources at an international level with an emphasis on cooperation with the Roma ethnic group. The complexity of the situation is most demanding in the "new" EU member states. None of the solutions that have been tried so far has been an unambiguous success either in terms of the opinions of stakeholders or in terms of value for

money. Joint projects within the Danube Strategy may bring fresh motivation. If present trends continue there could be serious social disturbances in the region in the next decade.

### **Support for economic development and competitiveness**

The main objective of socio-economic development in the Danube region will be **to establish a knowledge economy**, which should be the main competitive advantage of the member states. Priority support should be given to projects in the following areas:

- a) The creation of cross-border cooperation networks including national enterprises, small and medium enterprises, universities, research centres and regional and municipal authorities. These networks can exist both in virtual form or as formalised institutions (scientific and technological incubators and technology parks);
- b) Schemes focussing on the joint research and development of progressive technologies that support regional specialisations in particular goods and services and provide a competitive advantage in relation to other European regions;
- c) Innovation policy measures intended to increase exports of high-tech goods and knowledge-intensive services throughout the Danube region;
- d) Schemes for joint research and development and the protection of intellectual property rights.
- e) Schemes intended to support regional venture capital funds the build on the knowledge of local firms with a strong growth potential.
- f) Science and technology policy measures relating to the regional mobility of doctoral students and research workers between different universities and research centres in the region and also between the universities and research centres on the one hand and business on the other;
- g) Support for comprehensive intensification of cooperation between municipalities and the surrounding regions on the eastern border of the Schengen area in the Danube Region, which will become a new axis for economic development in the Danube region;
- h) Support by means of transport connections for cooperation between population centres, especially European development poles leading to polycentric development taking into consideration the specific characteristics of the territory as a conditions for the development of cities and the towns and villages in their vicinity, increasing their cohesion and the cohesion of the region as a whole in a European context.

We see the potential of the Danube space in support for the development of research, development and innovation in, for example, the Centropo region (Bratislava, Vienna, Győr and Brno) which has strong economic growth, largely thanks to mutual cooperation and the formation of clusters focussing on the development of knowledge society (with the involvement of the public, academic-intellectual and private sectors). This territory, with a radius of 200 km and a population of 6 million, is characterised by strong economic growth and could become the science and innovation centre of the Danube region.

In view of the fact that the countries of the Danube region are at different stages of economic development with diversified social problems, the Slovak Republic believes that the Danube Strategy must address **disparities between the areas** within the Danube region.