

The Danube, the Leading Actor of European Identity

Florin Iftode¹

Abstract: The regional policy is a strategic investment policy, which aims at stimulating the economic growth of all EU regions and cities and to improve quality of life. It is also an expression of solidarity, as it focuses on helping the less developed regions. The Regional policy aimed at EU regions and cities, stimulating the economic growth and improving the quality of life through strategic investments. It is also an active form of solidarity, which targets to support the less developed regions. Regional policy benefits from the biggest part of the EU budget for 2014-2020 (351.8 billion Euros out of a total of 1082 billion) and is therefore the main investment instrument of the Union. With an area of about 800,000 km (occupying one fifth of the EU's area) and with a population of over 100 million, the Danube Region is vital for Europe. Danube basin has a number of advantages that can enable the development of its rapid geographical position (opening to the east); cultural, ethnic and natural; sources of renewable energy (hydro, biomass, wind and thermal); benefits related to the environment (flora and fauna, water resources, Delta).

Keywords: regional policy; the Danube Region; EU

1. Introduction

Under EU regional policy, the macro-regional strategies have gained ground significantly, especially in the recent years. Several macro-regions types have been identified across Europe, covering large areas beyond the national borders. The EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was adopted in October 2009; The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (SUERD) began its implementation in June 2011; the EU Strategy for the Adriatic-Ionian region (EUSAIR) was approved by the European Commission in 2014; and the EU Strategy for the Alpine Space (EUSALP) is currently under development. Discussions about other possible future macro-regional European strategy are underway.

Given their identical geographical scope, the difference between macro-regional and transnational cooperation strategy programs might not seem obvious at first glance. However, it should be highlighted that:

- the macro regional strategies are not financial instruments. A macro-regional strategy is an integrated framework (approved by the European Council), which can be supported by the structural funds and European investment, among others,

¹ Associate Professor, PhD, Danubius University of Galati, Faculty of Communication and International Relations, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd, Galati, Romania, Tel.: +40372 361 102, Fax: +40372 361 290, Corresponding author: floriniftode@univ-danubius.ro.

to address common challenges facing the defined geographic area, on the Member States and third countries in the same geographic area, benefiting therefore of enhanced cooperation which contributes to the economic, social and territorial cohesion;

- The Transnational cooperation programs such as the Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) are financial instruments that contribute to achieving the EU's various policies and strategies, including the macro-regional strategies. However, either policy or strategy (macro-region) they are only one tool among other funding opportunities;

- Transnational cooperation programs and macro-regional strategies are based on various policies and/or legal frameworks, defining - among other things - different sets of rules, thematic priorities, internal governance structures and administrative procedures.

The Europe 2020 is the EU's strategy for economic growth for the coming decade. In a rapidly changing world, the EU wants to become a smart, sustainable economy and favorable to the inclusion. These three priorities are mutually supportive and are able to help the EU Member States to achieve a high level of labor employment, productivity and social cohesion. In practice, the Union has set five major targets - on employment, innovation, education, social inclusion and environment / energy - to be met by 2020. The Member States have adopted their own national targets in these areas. Various actions at European and national level support the Strategy.¹

The Europe 2020 targets:

1. Employment - 75% of the 20-64 year-olds to be employed;
2. Research and Development/innovation - 3% of the EU's GDP (public and private combined) to be invested in Research and Development/innovation;
3. Climate change / energy - greenhouse gas emissions 20% (or even 30%, if the conditions are right) lower than 1990; 20% of energy from renewables; 20% increase in energy efficiency;
4. Education - Reducing school drop-out rates below 10% at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds completing third level education;
5. Poverty / social exclusion - at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion.²

In this context the Danube Region can be seen as an area with economic growth potential insufficiently exploited. As part of the European Transport Corridor VII pan-EU, the Danube is a significant waterway that connects through the network

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_ro.htm.

² http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/targets/index_ro.htm.

Rhine-Main-Danube between Constanta port, the industrial centers of Western Europe and the port of Rotterdam. The Wider Danube basin includes countries and regions that could benefit in the future of direct access to the Black Sea and the importance of connecting the EU with broader region of Caucasus and Central Asia has already been consented by the Black Sea Synergy.

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (SUERD) is an instrument for macro-regional cooperation within the European Union, to which there are invited to participate the 14 EU Member States and third countries in the Danube basin.

2. What is SUERD?

European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (SUERD) plans to develop coordinated policies and actions in the catchment area, reinforcing the Europe 2020 commitments towards a smart, sustainable and inclusive economic growth based on four pillars and eleven priority areas. They will address key issues - such as mobility, energy, biodiversity, socio-economic development or safety.

In line with the territorial cooperation objective, the strategy does not focus on financing, but rather on strengthening the cooperation within the territory. A key – element of the strategy is to coordinate, by encouraging higher quality level and network activities, strengthening the existing regional and interregional cooperation, but also stimulating new cooperation.

In this context, taking into account the initiative launched by Romania and Austria in 2008, the European Council (18-19 June 2009) asked the European Commission to arrange for the adoption of a European Union Strategy for the Danube Region by the end of 2010, following the model of the Baltic Sea. In January 2010, the European Parliament debated the oral question “European Strategy for the Danube Region”, which was followed by the adoption of a resolution in which the members of the European Parliament ask the European Commission to launch this strategy, following a consultation process, to the end of 2010.

The European deputies stressed that the EU Strategy for the Danube Region should be developed in the following areas of inter-regional cooperation: protection and social development; sustainable economic development; transport and energy infrastructure; environment protection; Culture and Education.

Subsequently, the European Commission launched the public consultation (February-June 2010) during which there were organized in all the riparian states, conferences, seminars and roundtables. The outcome of these consultations was the development and presentation of the European Commission, on 8 December 2010, a Communication on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and an action plan.

3. Presentation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

The strategy is grouped into four “pillars” (main axes) and 11 priority areas.

I. Connecting the Danube Region

The objective is to improve connectivity of the Danube region with the rest of Europe in three priority areas: transport, energy and culture/tourism. The interconnection of the region can be achieved by improving coordination in achieving infrastructure work, improving the functioning of transport and energy systems, exchanges of experience on clean energy and promoting Danube’s culture and tourism.

II. Protecting the environment in the Danube Region

The Strategy outlines three priorities for biodiversity conservation and protecting the quality of life of those living on the banks of the Danube river basin and: restoring and maintaining water quality; managing the environmental risks; preserving biodiversity, landscapes and air and soil quality.

III. Building prosperity in the Danube region

From the highest standards of living in the EU to the lowest, from the staff to the highest level of qualification to the employees with the least education, from some of the most competitive regions of the EU up to some of the poorer - in terms of prosperity, the Danube is a region of contradictions. The strategy has three priorities that will reduce the heterogeneity of the region: developing the society based on knowledge through research, education and information technologies; supporting business competitiveness; investing in people and skills (human resources).

IV. Strengthening the Danube Region

Organized crime and corruption is a challenge in parts of the region and the Strategy defines actions to change this situation. For boosting sustainable growth and prosperity in this region, it is necessary to transform the Danube region in an area where you can live safely and strengthening integration in the EU. This pillar focuses on two priorities that will help strengthen the region: improving institutional capacity and cooperation; cooperation to address the issue of security and crime.

The Danube Strategy participating in fourteen states, nine EU Member States (Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany – as federal state and Länder Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary) and five non-member states of the EU (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine).

Objectives and Priorities

The strategy is structured around four main objectives:

- connecting the Danube Region;
- protect the environment in the Danube region;
- prosperity in the Danube region;
- strengthening the Danube region.

Each objective of the strategy corresponds to specific areas of action, grouped into 11 priority areas, each priority area is coordinated by 2 states / provinces in the region, namely:

A. Connecting the Danube Region

- Improve mobility and multimodality;
 - a. inland waterways (Austria and Romania);
 - b. road, rail and air (Slovenia and Serbia);
- Encouraging sustainable energy (Hungary and Czech Republic);
- To promote culture and tourism, people to people contacts (Romania and Bulgaria);

B. Protecting the environment in the Danube Region

- Restoring and maintaining water quality (Hungary and Slovakia);
- To manage environmental risks (Hungary and Romania);
- Preservation of biodiversity, landscapes and air and soil quality (Bavaria and Croatia).

C. building prosperity in the Danube Region

- Developing the society based on knowledge through research, education and information technologies (Serbia and Slovakia);
- Supporting the competitiveness of enterprises, including cluster development (Baden Württemberg and Croatia);
- Investing in people and skills (Austria and Republic of Moldova).

D. Strengthening the Danube Region

- stepping up the institutional capacity and cooperation (Austria and Slovenia);
- working together to promote security and tackle problems related to organized crime and serious crime (Bavaria and Bulgaria).

SUERD Governance

Originally created under the imperative of “the three no's” - no new funding, no new institutions and no new regulation - the Danube Strategy has been faced with the challenge of adapting to ensure the implementation of projects by exploiting the

existing European funds. In this context, *strengthening national structures of governance* of the Strategy is highly recommended by the Commission in order to promote and support actively, coherent and coordinated the political and sectoral interests in the Danube macro-region.

Thus, the governance the Danube Strategy is ensured:

a) at European level by:

- Council of the European Union and the Group of high-level officials of the EU Council, which provides general policy orientation;
- European Commission (DG Regional Policy and Urban - DG Regio), which has the role of policy coordination, monitoring, reporting and evaluation;
- The national coordinators, who, on the one hand, ensure the national coordination and propose practical aspects and on the other hand they shall consult and coordinate among themselves at macro-regional level to promote consistency between the priorities and governance models of the participating States;
- The coordinators of priority areas and Directory groups that ensure the identification of projects that implement the Action Plan of the Strategy.

b) at the national level - SUERD coordination is ensured by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the SUERD National Coordinator and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

- The strategic guideline of the SUERD implementation in Romania is performed by the Director Committee at ministry level, composed of ministers who coordinate the priority areas of the Strategy, chaired by the Foreign Affairs Minister. They may also meet annually.
- The inter-ministry working group - chaired by the SUERD National Coordinator consisting of Romanian coordinators of the three priority areas that are coordinated also by Romania, and the Romanian members of the Directory Committees of the other priority areas. The inter-ministry working group meets regularly, usually twice a month, following the implementation activity at the internal level and that in directory groups on priorities at external level.
- **The Consultative Council** is the forum representing the civil society and all stakeholders with an SUERD interest. It brings together everyone, on the initiative of one of its members, assuming also its organization.

The four levels of SUERD governance system in Romania above presented form the National Forum. The Executive Chairman of the National Forum is the Foreign Affairs Minister and Minister of Regional Development and Public Administration and the Minister of European funds are vice presidents.

The major benefits that the Strategy brings to Romania are:

- Developing the quality of life by increasing competitiveness and attractiveness of the Danube localities;
- Obtaining an economic advantage through business partnerships and “cross” cooperation between the public and private sectors;
- Attracting investments in strategic areas such as transport infrastructures, environment and energy.
- Engaging actors in Romania in a new format of transnational cooperation that will generate the transfer of expertise and skills at local government level.
- The contribution to increase the capacity to absorb structural funds and investments that incumbent Romania.¹

4. The Transnational Cooperation Programs. The Transnational Programme the Danube 2014-2020

The Transnational Cooperation Programme for the Danube Region is mainly focused on fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, conservation of natural and cultural heritage of the Danube region, improving connectivity and supporting the shift towards an economy with low emission of carbon dioxide. The transnational Danube Programme finances transnational cooperation projects according to the priorities of the EU Strategy for the Danube region (EUSDR). The Transnational Danube Programme is an instrument for financing the European territorial cooperation (ETC), better known as deInterreg. The ETC is one of the objectives of EU cohesion policy and it provides a framework for the implementation of joint actions and policy exchanges between national, regional and local actors in different Member States.

In order to achieve a higher degree of territorial integration of the Danube Region, the transnational cooperation programme as a policy and pioneer factor to face common challenges and needs in specific policy areas that are expected to transnational cooperation for obtaining concrete results.

Given the geographical coverage, this program extremely complex, offers a political dimension of transnational cooperation, which is unique in Europe, such as ensuring good mechanisms to contract partners who receive funding from different EU instruments.

The Danube Transnational Programme finances projects for the development and implementation of policies, tools, services and small-scale pilot investments.

¹ <https://www.mae.ro/strategia-dunarii>.

The total **budget** of the program is € 262 989 839 million, including the EU support (€ 597.00 221 924) and national counterpart (€ 41 065 242.00).

The EU support comes from three different funds:

- European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (€202 095 405.00);
- The assistance instrument for Pre-adhering II (IPA II) (€ 19 829 192.00);
- The European Neighborhood Instrument (ENI) (TBD).

The projects must form transnational partnerships to work together in the thematic priorities and specific objectives of the program.¹

The program priorities. The cooperation program is structured in four priority axis (a priority axis the fifth is related to technical assistance of the Transnational Programme of the Danube), which intends to develop policies and coordinated actions in the program of strengthening the commitments of the Europe 2020 Strategy by the three dimensions of the smart, sustainable growth and favorable to the inclusion.

The priorities of the Danube Transnational Programme are based on the characteristics and needs of the program area, which have been identified and agreed upon through an extensive programming and consultation process between the parties involved in the program and a specific ETC wider community. Moreover, the programming took into account the lessons learned from previous programming periods, the given financial framework and the existence of the adequate implementation and administration structures.

The projects supported by the Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) should form partnerships to work together in the following four thematic priorities and specific objectives:

I. Innovation and Social Responsibility in the Danube Region

To contribute to the implementation of the emblematic initiative “An Innovation Union of the Europe 2020 Strategy”, in the countries of the Danube Region, the program pays particular attention to a number of innovation topics relevant in the broad area of cooperation, such as eco-innovation, knowledge transfer, group policy, social innovation and specialized entrepreneurship, including specialized aspects of technological and non-technological innovation. The social dimension of innovation (the social innovation, educational aspects and entrepreneurial skills), is given particular importance. The research and innovation are interconnected with other thematic objectives addressed by the program. The specific objectives regarded of Priority 1 are:

- Improving framework conditions for innovation;

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/danube/#1.

- Increasing the skills for business and social innovation

The total budget for Priority 1 is € 72,995,850

II. The Environment and a Responsible Culture in the Danube Region

This program strengthens the joint and integrated approaches to preserve and manage the diversity of natural and cultural resources in the Danube region as a basis for development strategies and sustainable growth. In addition, the program intends to invest in the creation and / or maintenance of ecological corridors of transnational importance in the Danube region. This action is directly linked to water management and environmental control of risk factors such as flood risks. Moreover, disaster prevention and disaster management (risk management) are related to the risks that are caused by non-functioning ecosystems and manmade changes in climate conditions. The specific objectives are covered by Priority 2:

- Strengthen border water management and flood risk prevention;
- Sustainable use of heritage and encourage natural and cultural resources;
- To promote the restoration and management of ecological corridors;
- Improving training for environmental risk management.

The total budget for Priority 2 is € 83,423,830.

III. Danube Region responsible and better connected in terms of energy

The cooperation program addressing common challenges related to the environment (including low noise), low-carbon emissions and safer transport systems, including waterways and inland ports and multimodal connections in order to contribute to sustainable regional and local mobility to modal integration and intelligent transport. The program aims also at supporting the regional connectivity and balanced accessibility of the urban and rural areas. Better management of regional mobility and better permeability of the regional borders should ensure that urban and rural areas benefit from the opportunities created by major transport networks that are developed at European level. On the other hand, the energy is a typical problem where a transnational approach is essential to ensure security of supplying countries, market integration and better regional planning and infrastructure development in order to identify the most critical ones. Regional energy planning and coordination should be improved across the Danube, in the broader context of policy development of the EU in order to protect the energy security and efficiency of supply. Another aspect is developing smart distribution systems where the area is still in the early stages. The program aims at contributing within its specific application to the development of intelligent energy distribution systems to make significant investments of districts from renewable energy resources, energy efficiency and smart and more efficient grids. The specific objectives are covered by Priority 3:

- Support in the ecological and safe systems for transport and balanced accessibility of the urban and rural areas;
- On improving energy security and energy efficiency.

The total budget for Priority 3 is € 54,746,889

IV. A good governance of Danube Region

Cooperation and institutional capacity is a key objective and the vital element of the program at the same time. The institutional capacity is not just a technical issue of training civil servants, but referring to how public authorities interact with and provide services for companies and citizens. “Good governance” is the basis and the ultimate aim to strengthen the institutional capacity. Good governance builds trust and social capital. States with high levels of social capital tend to perform better in economic terms.

The need was identified by analyzing the development capacity of public authorities and other public civil society stakeholders and to become able to address more efficiently the challenges of utmost importance for the region. Establishing institutional cooperation under the program should lead to improving the legal and political development of strategies and action plans, development of common capacities and coordinated delivering of services in areas with major societal challenges such as policies on labor market, educational systems and policies, demographic changes and migration challenges, inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups, participatory planning process and the involvement of civil society, cooperation and urban-rural partnership, cooperation on security and justice issues. In addition, the specific objectives are covered by Priority 4:

- Improving the institutional capacity to deal with major societal challenges;
- Support for the governance and the implementation of SUERD.

The total budget for Priority 4 is € 33,890,932

DTP participating countries

Danube Transnational Programme (DTP) brings together 9 EU Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany - Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria-, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia countries) and 5 outside the EU (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Ukraine - four provinces: Chernivetska Oblast, Ivano-Frankiviska Oblast, Zakarpatska Oblast and Odessa Oblast).¹

Geographically, the DTP area overlaps with the territory tackled by the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (SUERD), comprising also the Danube basin and mountain areas (such as the Carpathians, the Balkans and part of the Alps). It is the

¹ <http://www.mdrap.ro/dezvoltare-regionala/-4970/-7572/-7498>.

most international river basin in the world. The area makes up one fifth of EU territory and it is inhabited by about 114 million people.

Austria is a mountainous country due to its location at the eastern end of the Alps. This mountain range dominates the western and southern parts of Austria while the smaller eastern provinces of the country are located in the Danube basin. The most important economic sectors of Austria in 2014 were wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and services, food services (22.8%), industry (22.1%) and public administration, defense, education, health human and social work activities (17.7%).

The main export partners from Austria are Germany, Italy and the US, while its main import partners are Germany, Italy and Switzerland.

Located in the south-east of the Balkans, **Bulgaria** has a diverse topography. The north is dominated by the great Danube Plain lowlands with the Danube River which defines the border with the neighboring country, Romania. The southern part of the country, however, is dominated by highlands and high plains while in the east, the Black Sea coast attracts tourists all year round.

The most important sectors of the Bulgarian economy in 2014 were industry (23.5%), wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and food services (21.3%) and public administration, defense, education, human health and social work activities (13.2%).

The main export partners of Bulgaria are Germany, Turkey and Italy, while its main import partners are Russia, Germany and Italy.

Croatia has borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia and it is an independent country since 1991. The country has a long and dramatic coastline with the Adriatic Sea, where the country has over 1000 islands and islets, of which only 48 are permanently inhabited.

The most important sectors of the Croatia economy in 2014 has been wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and food services (21.2%), industry (21.1%) and public administration, defense, education, human health and social work activities (15.4%).

Croatia's main export partners are Italy, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Slovenia while its main import partners are Germany, Italy and Slovenia.

The Czech Republic is a landlocked country in Central Europe and became a separate state in 1993 after Czechoslovakia split into two countries.

The most important sectors of the economy of the Czech Republic in 2014 were industry (32.6%), business services, transport, accommodation and food wholesale and retail (17.9%) and public administration, defense, education, human health and social work activities (14.9%).

The main export partners from the Czech Republic are Germany, Slovakia and Poland, while its main import partners are Germany, Poland and Slovakia.

With a land that stretches from the North Sea and Baltic Sea in the north of the Alps, in south **Germany** has the largest population of any EU country. Germany borders Denmark to the north east Poland and the Czech Republic, Austria and Switzerland to the south, France and Luxembourg in the south-west and Belgium and the Netherlands to the northwest.

The most important sectors of the German economy in 2014 were industry (25.9%), public administration, defense, education, human health and social work activities (18.2%) and wholesale and retail trade, transport, activities lodging and restaurants (15.5%).

The main export partners of Germany are France, the US and the UK, while its main import partners are the Netherlands, France and China.

Hungary is a landlocked country in Central Europe, bordered by no less than seven countries: Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. The country is mostly flat, with low mountains in the north. The most important sectors of the economy of Hungary in 2014 were industry (26.4%), wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and food services (18.5%) and public administration, defense, education, human health and social work activities (17.5%).

The main export partners in Hungary are Germany, Austria and Romania while its main import partners are Germany, Austria and Russia.

Romania is situated in southeast Europe, it is dominated by the Carpathian Mountains in the north and center of the country, while the main feature in the south is the largest valley of the Danube, which is a delta near the Black Sea.

The most important economic sectors in Romania in 2014 were industry (27.3%), wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and food services (17.9%) and public administration, defense, education, health human and social work activities (10.3%).

The main export partners of Romania are Germany, Italy and France, while its main import partners are Germany, Italy and Hungary.

Slovakia is a country in central and Eastern Europe bordering the Czech Republic and Austria to the west, Poland to the north, Ukraine to the east and Hungary to the south. Carpathian Mountains extend across the northern half of the country and include the High Tatras mountains, which provide a natural watershed between Slovakia and Poland. In the southern half of the country there are plains and the Danube plain.

The most important sectors of the Slovak economy in 2014 were industry (24.7%), wholesale and retail trade, transport, accommodation and food services (22.4%) and public administration, defense, education, human health and social work activities (14.5%).

Slovakia's main export partners are Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland while its main import partners are Germany, the Czech Republic and Austria.

Located in southern Central Europe, **Slovenia** borders Italy to the west, Austria to the north, Croatia to the south and southeast, and Hungary to the northeast. The north is dominated by the Alps, while in southwest Karst Plateau is a region filled with limestone caves and gorges. Slovenia has a 46.6 km coastline on the Adriatic Sea between Italy and Croatia.

The most important sectors of the economy in 2014 were industry Slovenia (27.1%), business services, transport, accommodation and food wholesale and retail (20.4%) and public administration, defense, education, human health and social work activities (17.0%)

The main import and export partners are Germany Slovenia, Italy and Austria.

Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina - along with other countries of the Western Balkans - was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership during the European Council summit in Thessaloniki in June 2003.

Montenegro. In 2006, the Montenegrin Parliament declared independence to the State Union for Serbia and Montenegro. In 2008, the new country applied for EU membership. The accession negotiations with Montenegro started on 29 June 2012.

Serbia - along with other 5 countries of the Western Balkans - was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership during the European Council summit in Thessaloniki in 2003. In 2008, it was adopted a European Partnership for Serbia to establish priorities for the country's membership application, in 2009 Serbia has officially applied. In March 2012 Serbia got EU candidate status. On 21 January 2014, the First Intergovernmental Conference was held, officially signaling the start of accession negotiations with Serbia.

5. Conclusions

Having run 1,000 kilometers through Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Moldova, the Lower Danube has been identified as one of the most important biodiversity regions in the world. The river hosts a wide variety of freshwater habitats, rare and endangered, offering many valuable opportunities to support and revive local activities. It is also a region with a rich cultural heritage, where the local life is intertwined with the river life.

The Danube is the largest continuous area of wetland in the world and one of the last relatively undisturbed large regions in Europe. Since the end of last century to the present, the human intervention has destroyed over 80% of all wetlands of the Danube. Over the river and its tributaries were built hydropower stations, dams, drainage systems, which destroyed the habitats link between meadow and river system, and their ecological functions were affected.

Building great navigators - channels linking the sea to the river, the Iron Gates dam and deepening the riverbed - had a significant impact on biodiversity.

Although in some sectors the awareness of the damage caused by human intervention increases, new threats continue to emerge. The navigation projects - planned regularization of the river between Bulgaria and Romania -, overexploitation of fishery resources, poaching, infrastructure development unfriendly environment or the lack of a shared vision in addressing the challenges in the Danube Delta threatens to affect more unique natural ecosystems, located on the lower Danube. The climate change is another challenge that threatens thousands of species of plants and animals and dozens of types of ecosystems after bringing: more frequent floods, longer droughts, decreased fish stocks and reduced biodiversity.

The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (SUERD) is a political initiative of Romania and Austria and is a Community mechanism of cooperation of the Danube basin states, for economic and social development of Danube macro-region by strengthening the implementation of the regional policies and EU legislation. Romania is the co-initiator of SUERD, along with Austria, and it contributes to the development and implementation of the Danube Strategy, together with all other countries bordering on the basis of national positions defined in the special inter-ministerial working group created in this respect. The Foreign Ministry provides national coordination in the field and to this end it has been created the Office of the Danube Strategy. Romania manages three priority areas of all the 11. Each priority area is coordinated by two states / provinces in the region. Romania coordinates the following areas:

- Transport inland waters - along with Austria;
- Culture and Tourism - with Bulgaria;
- Management of environmental risks – with Hungary.

The Danube Strategy is an important step towards simplifying the current funding procedures and it supports the efforts to absorb the European funds already committed in financing the investment projects.

The Danube transnational program is based on four thematic priorities:

- A region of the innovative Danube and responsible socially: promoting innovation, knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship;
- A region of the ecological Danube: conservation and management of natural and cultural patrimony of the Danube Region;
- A region of the Danube better connected and more responsible in terms of energy: the development of safe and sustainable transport systems, promoting energy efficiency;
- A region of the well governed Danube: providing support for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and to improve the legal frameworks and policies in order to address major societal challenges, such as measures on the labor market, education systems, demographic changes and so on.

The Danube Strategy is a European instrument of macro-regional cooperation. The strategy will be implemented by each riparian Member State individually. It addresses public local and regional authorities and it answers to their development needs.

6. References

http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_ro.htm.

http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-a-nutshell/targets/index_ro.htm.

<https://www.mae.ro/strategia-dunarii>.

http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/policy/cooperation/macro-regional-strategies/danube/#1.

<http://www.mdrap.ro/dezvoltare-regionala/-4970/-7572/-7498>.

<http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/archives/seerecon/gen/eu-see.htm>.