

Romania, Development and European Integration in the Context of the Implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region

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Abstract: Romania, the initiating country of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, along with Austria, has the opportunity, at least for the Danube basin, to make substantial and much more productive progress in its regional development. Our approach is that this strategy represents a mechanism for transnational development and can generate a more than necessary stimulus in achieving the general objectives that Romania has proposed in the process of economic and social cohesion for the integration in the European Union. In the content of this approach, we will try to emphasize Romania's major role in stimulating the vitality and the force of a macro-program of development, a macro-program that Romania has the chance to capitalize in its favor, but also to demonstrate its capacity as a driving force in the Union's South - East region. Considering that Romania exerts its presidency of the Strategy from 1st November 2018 to 30th October 2019, represents a very important asset for developing and canalizing this funding mechanism towards a very important national interest.

Key words: European Union Strategy for the Danube Region; Romania; Transnational Danube Program; Austria.

1. Introduction

The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region is based on the “the three no” principle, with no new funds, no new institutions, no new regulations, and it is facing a major challenge to adapt to existing mechanisms. The governance of the Strategy is carried out under European and national coordination which outlines the structure of the main pillars and priority areas of interest for achieving the general goal defined in the Strategy.

At European level, the governance of the Strategy is achieved through mechanisms consisting of: the Council of the European Union and the high level group of the

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Council, provides for the overall political orientation, the European Commission, which has the role of policy coordination, monitoring, reporting and evaluation, The Focal Point for Technical Assistance, designed to improve governance of the Strategy, National coordinators, that provide national coordination and propose practical aspects of various activities and priority area Coordinators and Steering groups to identify projects implementing the Action Plan of the Strategy.

At national level, the governance of the Strategy is ensured and defined by the adoption of Government Decision No. 462 of 28 June 2018 on the functioning of the national coordination system for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. By means of the normative act, several public institutions and authorities were invested with responsibilities in implementing the objectives set in the 11 Priority Areas. Besides, in order to carry out the tasks of coordinating the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the Deputy Minister for European Affairs, collaborates at institutional level with the other ministries in charge, which have responsibilities in implementing the objectives set within the priority areas of the Strategy European Union for the Danube Region. Supporting the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region is done through the Interministerial Working Group, which is a working body under the coordination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, through the Delegate Minister for European Affairs, and which has the objective of debating the relevant developments at European, macroregional level and national implications of the Strategy, namely to identify and decide the concrete ways of implementing the Strategy and to contribute to the development of national positions and strategic planning documents regarding the Strategy.

In the context of Romania's taking over the rotating Presidency of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region and considering the intersection of the social partners about their willingness to actively participate in the events organized at national, regional and European level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved an operational procedure on cooperation with associative partners to promote topics of interest. This procedure keeps in general the principles existing in the Strategy for the Presidency of Romania at the Council of the European Union. The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region is the second macro-regional strategy of the European Union, taking over the cooperation model developed by the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea with adaptation to the specificity of the territorial basin of the Danube. Also within this construction there are four major pillars defined by: interconnecting the Danube region, protecting the environment in the

Danube region, increasing prosperity in the Danube region and strengthening the Danube region. With an area of approximately 800,000 km² and a population of over 112 million, the Danube region is of great importance for Europe. The Danube basin has a number of advantages that can allow its rapid development: the geographical position (opening to the East); cultural, ethnic and natural diversity; important sources of renewable energy (hydro, biomass, wind and thermal); the environmental benefits (flora and fauna, water resources, the Danube Delta).

The Danube region has insufficient exploitation potential. As part of the pan-European transport Corridor VII of the EU, the Danube is a very important waterway linking the Rin-Main-Danube network between the port of Constanta, the industrial centers in Western Europe and the port of Rotterdam. The enlarged Danube basin includes states and regions that could benefit from direct access to the Black Sea in the future and the importance of connecting the EU to the wider Caucasus and Central Asia region has already been agreed through the Black Sea Synergy.

The countries that are part of the Strategy are those covered by the Danube cooperation process: Germany (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), Austria, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. Of these, nine are member states of the European Union and the others are involved in various cooperation initiatives with the European Union, some of them with the stated aim of becoming a closer or longer member of the European Union.

2. Content

In the context that, out of the 2,860 km of the Danube, 1,075 km are on the Romanian territory, it is necessary to see this river section as an objective of great national interest and, to the same extent, of European interest. In the case of Romania, strengthening Danube cooperation is and remains a priority considering that the potential for sustainable development of the region is major and we want to contribute to the positive transformation of the Danube into a milestone of the European space as part of the Rin-Main-Danube. The aspects to be considered are numerous and the dimensions of regional cooperation are multiple and complex: transport, tourism, agriculture, energy, security and environment and these are not exhaustively approached. The economic and social development of the Danube basin must be of a sustainable nature, observing the elements of the European strategy.

An important economic aspect of the Danube remains the shipping sector. Set up in the Pan-European Transport Corridor VII, the Danube is a component of the priority transport axis that links the North Sea through the port of Rotterdam and the Black Sea to the port of Constanta. This waterway should be used in terms as productive as possible for the economic development of the adjacent regions and to reduce the existing disparities between different regions.

The process of enlargement and integration of new states initiated and carried out by the European Union has transformed the Danube into an internal river of the Union and helps us redefine the regional cooperation activity in a new and integrated manner in the context of Community policies and instruments. The initiatives of the riparian states to meet the needs of the region are now joined by the opening up of the European institutions, the European Commission and, last but not least, the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region.

There is a chance, or rather a challenge to be capitalized and developed now. As we have the symmetry of the two Presidencies, the Council and the Strategy, Romania needs to ensure greater efficiency in the management of European funds and to integrate the current elements of the regional development policy. The strategy will substantially contribute to the development of this corridor by strengthening the dialogue with third countries in the Danube basin and implicitly will facilitate the expansion and solidification of European values and standards in the neighborhood. Besides, the potential of the Strategy in the wider Black Sea Area, which is an extension of the connection with the Central Asia area, should be considered. At the same time, the Danube Strategy can more respond to the European Union's expectations of strengthening the capacity to monitor its external borders, but also to develop the linking of the European space to the pro-European policies of the neighboring states for mutual benefit.

The territorial cohesive development can be defined as a result of balanced, coherent and full territorial harmonization, in terms of the economic, security, social, environmental, easy working conditions for all citizens, regardless of the area they live in, by highlighting the specificity of each area, thus contributing to a sustainable Europe. The mechanisms through which territorial cohesion can be achieved are those that address directly to regions and those pointing to the uniformity of sectoral policies with territorial impact. Achieving territorial cohesion is the establishment of horizontal coordination between different sectoral policies at both community and national level as well as a vertical approach between different institutions, from European level to the community level.

For the period 2021-2027, Romania's contribution to the development of a new action plan within the Danube Strategy is extremely important. Basically, the Strategy has a visible maturity in the implementation of funds of only five years, which gives Romania the opportunity to think strategically in this area at this time. Romania's presidency at the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region will be carried out under the title "We Strengthen Cohesion for a Common Prosperity in the Danube Region", through which a synergy with the motto of the Romanian Presidency at the Council of the European Union was desired, "Cohesion, a common European value", considering the overlapping of the two mandates in the former half of next year.

Romania aims at promoting at least three priority themes and directions for action during the mandate: improving connectivity and mobility in the Danube region by promoting transport, tourism, digitization and people-to-people contacts; reinvigorating the European Strategy for the Danube Region by creating synergies between all actors involved and the European Commission as well as operationalising the Secretariat of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region; exchanges of experience on the priority areas of the macro-strategy, i.e. the transnational development of clusters through the exchange of best practices between entities participating in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

"By assuming the Presidency of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, Romania intends to relaunch this mechanism so that the benefits of our country's participation in this form of regional collaboration can become more visible to citizens", said Deputy Minister for European Affairs, Victor Negrescu.¹

In particular, Romania should strongly focus on the development of the river transport and resuscitation sector, along with the development of energy supply, especially the transport of liquefied natural gas. By strengthening relations with neighboring third countries, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Serbia, Romania can become a highly valid sectorial policy maker and could thus impose its own macroeconomic interests in the area. Within the Baltic Strategy, the high number of priorities is a cause for concern. Partners should use the review of the action plan as an opportunity to check whether all priorities continue to have the macroregional relevance that justifies their inclusion in the strategy. Within the Danube Strategy, the lack of political responsibility must be approached in the review of the action plan for the period 2018-2019. The Commissioner for regional policy reminded the

¹<https://www.mae.ro>

coordinators of the Danube Strategy about this aspect at a joint meeting in June 2018. Some priority areas (for example, inland transport or tourism) have not presented concrete projects yet. The allocation of priority areas should take into account the fact that some non-coordinating countries would like to be assigned a priority area.

The aspect of administrative capacity should also be approached. It requires an adequate response at national and regional level, especially in the countries benefiting from the instrument for pre-accession assistance and the European neighborhood instrument. Partner countries within the European Strategy for Adriatic Sea and Ionian Sea have different views on cooperation priorities. Until now, their tendency has been to focus on projects with a narrow, national scope, instead of considering the Macro-Regional Strategies as a policy change framework that generates specific processes, inter-regional networks and collaboration platforms.

A different approach would help these countries develop and plan more geographically balanced measures, that would be a macro-regional added value. In more general terms, it is necessary to reconcile the priorities of the Adriatic-Ionian Strategy with national, regional and sectoral policies, as well as with strategic documents and processes (e.g. Berlin process, Western Balkans strategy, a.o.).¹ The fact that the financial support is provided in the form of transnational cooperation programs within the European territorial cooperation could canalize Romania into a very beneficial mechanism in terms of segmentation and operationalization of infrastructure investments on the territorial interconnectivity.

The Danube Region has an operational financial allocation for the implementation of the Macro-Regional Strategy of about 263 million euro, a sum of money that is allocated and that Romania can reach through a strategic approach. In this direction, it is absolutely necessary that during the Presidency of Romania, the political side of the Strategy should be approached, a side which proved to be very important for the implementation of the priorities stipulated in the Strategy. The lack of political cohesion at both national and inter-regional level has made it difficult to implement the major priorities laid down in the areas of interest stipulated in the Danube Strategy.

The European Parliament supports better coordination in the implementation of the Danube Strategy and stipulates within a resolution several aspects regarding the degree of improvement of the Strategy for the next multiannual financial exercise. Thus, the resolution states that: it underlines the positive impact the Strategy

¹<https://eur-lex.europa.eu>

has had on the cooperation between the participating countries and regions, by improving mobility and interconnections across transportation ways, promoting green energy, culture and sustainable tourism and, in particular, strengthening direct contacts between people and achieving a greater degree of cohesion between the regions and countries participating in the Strategy; it considers that the “Euro Access” project, “Keep Danube Clean” initiative, are clear positive examples of how to overcome the obstacles often encountered by projects of transnational and cross-border importance in terms of funding; it also considers that the reopening of a Danube Strategy Center could contribute to a better implementation of the Strategy; stresses that avoiding damage caused by large-scale floods remains one of the major environmental challenges for the countries in the Danube macro-region; it stresses that additional common measures to prevent cross-border pollution should be considered; recalls the need for strategic projects and stresses that it is essential to maintain a high degree of political support and increase the resources and capacity of the competent state authorities to approach the rest of the problems; therefore, it stresses that it is necessary to maintain the political momentum of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region and to ensure the productive nature of the activity of the Strategy’s coordination group. Considering the natural connection between the Danube and the Black Sea, it invites the participating countries to strengthen the coordination between the Strategy and the Black Sea cross-border cooperation and to work together closely in order to overcome the common socio-economic, environmental and transport challenges and, moreover, it stresses that a more integrated approach of mobility and multimodal solutions in the Danube region would also bring benefits for environment.¹

Being part of a European construction that wishes to become a macro-state is a chance, but also a challenge in a scenario that must strengthen Romania as an independent region in the socio-economic sphere and can develop a sustainable future, especially on this vital area, the Danube.

¹<http://www.europarl.europa.eu>

3. Conclusions

The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region is one of the four macro-regional strategies developed and implemented by the European Union to increase the degree of economic and social cohesion in the European space. The fact that the results of this strategy are noticed only after a five-year implementation maturity represents Romania's opportunity to capacity and develop certain areas of interest and also represents the political opportunity to strengthen its role as coordinator in the region.

Taking the lead in this mechanism by ensuring communication with Serbia, Bulgaria, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine would be an extremely important step that would only strengthen Romania's major role within the Union at its Eastern border.

A better coordination and hierarchy of major national priorities makes the Romanian Presidency of the Danube Strategy have a defining role for the next period of financing and development of the region.

Under these circumstances, we consider to be very important trying to apply cohesive and focused policies to strengthen political cooperation in the region, which is the foundation of a regional and macro-regional development and security direction.

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