

The prospects for involvement in the proposed Danube Strategy for the countries of the Western Balkans

In June 2009 the Council of the European Union made its decision, initiating the creation of the second macro-regional strategy of the EU, the Danube Strategy (EUSDR). Following the steps of the already existing Baltic Strategy, the Commission asked Member States to contribute to the development of the project which was soon backed up by the so-called Ulm Declaration (6 June 2009), aiming to formalize the needs and expectations of Member States on the new initiative.

By the end of March 2010, eight EU Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) and three non-member states (Croatia, Serbia and the Ukraine) have submitted their non-papers to the Commission. As a result of the summit held in Budapest in February 2010 the forming strategy is considering five main priority areas, as listed:

- Inter-connectibility and communication;
- Environmental and nature protection;
- Socio-economic issues;
- Elements regarding the cultural dimension of the cooperation;
- Security-related issues.

Although the main determining factor lying behind the strategy was the prevention of three issues: creating a separate financial “bucket” for the strategy, creating new legislation and creating no institutions, some of the non-papers submitted—though in a shaded way—aimed for breaching some of these guidelines, upon successful implementation, in the later phase of the project. This could result in for example a new financial initiative in the financial framework of the EU from 2014.

Concerning the involvement of non-member states of the Western Balkans, the following guidelines were set up by Member States for them:

- they should play a role of decision-shaping, leaving the main decision-making role purely for MSs, of which conditions must clearly be set;
- the project should not change the framework of the already created institutions (ENP, EaP, ENPI, IPA, etc.) and no duplication nor reduction should happen to the latter, though the strategy can serve as a tool for enlargement/integration.

Looking at areas and concrete projects of cooperation non-papers have outlined, participating countries are trying to embed not only pan-European projects, but also their own national interests in the framework of the EUSDR. Not stating that

some of these projects do not have the legitimacy at the European level (e.g. the proposed de-mining project by Croatia and the clearing of the river bed of sunken vessels in Serbia), a cut in the number and scope of the projects might be reasonable from the EU Member States’ side. The element that puts a stopper in the activities of the EUSDR is the financial component: as at this moment no new instrument is accessed to back the Strategy (like IPA, ENPI and third-party donors’ contribution like EIB, EBRD), participating countries have to reassess their own projects that are funded by those existing financial instruments that are linked to EUSDR as well. Given the division of the IPA and ENPI funding areas regarding accessibility of potential candidate and candidate countries to funds, one can easily argue that even in the shorter run, differences can grow between the two groups of targeted states. This is considered to be a definite disadvantage for the Strategy. It is notable to mention that neither Croatia, nor Serbia did not mention any projects inside the framework of IPA that are considering areas of cooperation accessible to candidate countries only.

What can be a definite advantage to the region is the infrastructural development. Participating WB countries are keen on putting more emphasis on the development of Pan-European Transport Corridors 4, 5, 7 and 10 (the latter concerns Macedonia as well).

Potential of EUSDR lies also in the fields of fostering multi-modal transport, enhanced cultural exchange (e.g. via the CEEPUS program), energy security and increased inter-connectibility between power line and tube systems and police cooperation (fostered mainly by Germany). The latter can involve Macedonia and Moldova as well. This project can involve activities regarding anti-corruption, tackling cross-border crime and exchange of know-how. Although the Serbian proposition of making Belgrade into a regional center for combating crime along the Danube River might be put aside, this field can be turned to a successful part of the EUSDR project.

The prospects of the strategy are defined mainly by the German position (that favours both the empowerment of municipalities and towns in shaping the Strategy and also the industrial approach to the river basin, therefore puts emphasis on R&D projects) and the determinedness of the Hungarian Council Presidency of 2011. The current Hungarian government sees EUSDR as one of the main pillars for their presidential program; therefore it is expected to fill content in the framework of the Strategy.

Prepared by Zsombor Zeold – Residential Intern