

**Johannes HAHN**

Commissioner for Regional Policy

**Danube Strategy: Forum for EU and non EU states to cooperate and learn from each other**

Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Vukovar Danube Conference

**Croatia, Vukovar, 29th April 2011**

Madame Prime Minister,

Madame President,

Ministers,

Excellencies,

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to congratulate Croatia for having organised this conference on the Danube Strategy here in Vukovar. Coming just after the Council's endorsement of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, this meeting takes place at a very important moment for the Region.

The challenge is now to press on with preparations for implementation, in order to be ready to get down to work as soon as possible after final endorsement by the European Council in June. We need a very focussed approach, with defined targets and agreed timelines to

mobilise effort by all players. Agreeing the Action Plan was only the start: we need to ensure that our working methods will rapidly deliver results citizens can see.

Those countries that have agreed to lead co ordination of one or more priority areas of the Strategy now have the challenge – and the responsibility – of getting work off the ground. In this strategy all participating states, EU MS and others, meet as equal partners, and I am delighted to be addressing you in Croatia, which has undertaken to share the co ordination of two priority areas – competitiveness and biodiversity.

The General Affairs Council acknowledged the crucial importance of third countries to achieve the objectives of the Danube Strategy. We simply cannot do it without you.

The Danube is the world's most international river, and it connects EU members, candidate countries and non EU-members. This strategy should bind all partners, whatever their current status, closer together. The aim is to bring down barriers that prevent the Danube basin tapping its full potential by working more closely and more coherently together.

There can hardly be a more potent symbol of need to put the past behind us and work in partnership than Vukovar itself. The coming together of partners in the Danube strategy represents the spirit of reconciliation, cooperation and mutual trust that characterises the EU.

It is also an opportunity to work – together – to resolve the weaknesses born of false divisions. Only together can we tackle the lack of cross border transport or energy links. Only through concerted action can we make optimal use of the Danube and its waterways for environmentally friendly transport. Only by forging new ways of working can we ensure that our enterprises, our universities and our young people benefit fully from their location in this extraordinarily rich and diverse region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Work is getting underway, as the priority area coordinators set up their Steering Boards, and organise their first meetings.

And in this process I believe that we will see a very special exchange of experience between the participating states. I can think of no other forum in which there are opportunities for EU and non EU states to work so directly with each other and learn from each other.

The Danube Strategy will realise vital projects in the areas of transport, energy, environment, economic development, education and security which could not be realised with existing frameworks.

Well-functioning institutional and administrative capacity and the appropriate know-how will be essential to bring such large and complex projects about.

We will need to focus more on capacity building at all levels, individual, organisational, regional, and national. This is true of states both in and outside the EU. Considerable sums of money for technical assistance exist and should be taken up. Some funds will be available to help with the co ordination of the priority areas specifically.

And of course we need to do all we can to ensure that those not, or not yet, in the EU have access to the support they need.

But I am convinced that the experience of taking part in the strategy will itself have a very substantial impact on improving performance throughout the region – whether simply from working closely with other partners or through more formal exchange of good practice.

The relationships within this strategy are a win-win situation for all sides.

For example, the Strategy is an opportunity to integrate non-EU members into the region's many networks, notably in the business, academic and research areas. They have much to gain from participation and the existing members will gain too from their presence.

If I am emphasising today the importance of non EU Member States in the Strategy, it is because I see them not only gaining from their involvement, but as having a great deal to contribute.

The Danube region cannot be fully cohesive, if co operation is takes place only between the EU and others.

Greater cooperation between Danube states outside the EU will make an important contribution to the success of the strategy. And I hope that the Danube strategy can play its part in helping to overcome political tensions and foster regional integration throughout the Danube basin.

There are some areas of work where the Strategy crucially needs the involvement of our partners. If we take the example of security, Commission experts are working already with the German and Bulgarian priority area coordinators on the fight against smuggling, and international crime, as well as tackling corruption in the region. The Danube Strategy will support improved cooperation in police work, justice and customs. Europol will be actively involved, as will the Regional Cooperation Council in Sarajevo. We count on our partners in and outside the EU to commit themselves to unprecedented joint efforts in this field, to ensure that greater mobility in the region does not lead to new security risks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ultimate objective of the Strategy must remain bringing tangible improvements to the lives of people in the region.

The will to coordinate policies and better align the resources available in the Danube region, from the Structural Funds, the Instrument for Pre-Accession and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument will be key to the success of the strategy. Let me say that, even if we cannot yet know the precise budget for the EU Structural Funds, nor for Preaccession Assistance for the coming financial period, it is not too early to start work on identifying the Danube projects we will work on together after 2013, and the priorities for the resources that will become available. I hope that all administrations represented here today will tackle this task in good time.

We all have a tough job ahead of us. But I am confident that the Strategy can make a real difference to this region, as long as we all - EU members and non members or not yet members alike - pull together. Today's conference is a step in the right direction.