



BULLETIN

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Plans to Develop a EU Strategy for the Danube Region

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At the European Council summit on 18 and 19 June the EU states, endorsing Austria's and Romania's initiative, requested the European Commission to prepare a strategy for the Danube region by the end of 2010. The strategy, while likely to be patterned after the EU's Baltic Sea strategy, will focus more on the tightening of links with non-EU states in that region. If the Danube project is implemented, one probable side-effect of it will be the decline of interest in the Eastern Partnership in some EU states. The new strategy will complicate the implementation of Poland's regional policy.

In February 2009 Austria and Romania put before the EU members a proposal to strengthen cooperation among the Danube basin states by preparing a strategy. The proposal has enjoyed from the outset the support of the European Commission (EC) and it was consistent with a message of EU Commissioner for Regional Policy Danuta Hübner, who had appealed, in October 2008, for the development by the EU of a comprehensive Danube region policy that would allow both for the region's specific character and for its importance to the economy, transport and environmental protection in the Union. In successive months diplomats of Austria and Romania held consultations with representatives of the states in the region and with the other EU members. The proposal met with a favorable response of the Danube basin states, as evidenced by the support expressed in the declaration of the Ulm Danube Summit of May 2009 attended by Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Hungary and by German and Austrian *Länder*. As a result, in June the European Council requested the EC to submit, by the end of 2010, a strategy for the Danube region as yet another macro-regional strategy after the Baltic Sea strategy unveiled by the Commission this June and scheduled for adoption in October 2009. Austria and Romania have suggested that the implementation of the Danube project should commence under the Hungarian presidency, i.e. in the first half of 2011. An informal meeting of the region's states is planned for the autumn of 2009 in Vienna, to address in more detail the principles of the strategy.

The Origins and General Principles of the Strategy. The strategy is a follow-up to measures adopted already in 2002 when, based on a proposal from Austria and Romania backed by the EC and by the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, the Danube Cooperation Process was launched. The Process, encompassing Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine, was meant to foster coordination of regional initiatives and to contribute to the deepening of economic and cultural cooperation, improvement of transport infrastructure and preservation of the environment. However, Austria and Romania have argued that a loose coordination structure is insufficient for proper utilization of the Danube region's potential and that a comprehensive strategy needs to be developed under the EU's auspices to enable the existing funds and institutions to be more productively employed. Hence the strategy is to serve the purposes of coordination of regional projects undertaken by the EU (under different policies, including the cohesion policy), by states working together within the networks of institutions and organizations active in the Danube basin, by their regions and local communities, and by NGOs. The project initiators believe that the integration function of the Danube cooperation, which consists in the tightening of links between the old, new and prospective UE members as well as between Central Europe and the Black Sea region, will be thus enhanced.

It can be inferred from statements by Austrian and Romanian politicians that the strategy is to encompass the Danube Cooperation Process states. Not only will it enhance cooperation between and among the region's EU members, but it will also be targeted at forging stronger links with the Western Balkans and with Ukraine and Moldova. It follows that while the project is most likely to be modeled on the Baltic Sea strategy, its external dimension will be probably more extensive. The similarity of the two strategies could be their structure. The Danube strategy is to be focused on the implementation of actions and flagship projects in pre-determined areas of cooperation. The implementation of the strategy and a supplementing action plan by the Danube states would be coordinated and monitored by the EC.

Consequences for the EU and for the Danube Region. The Danube strategy proposal evidences the growing importance of a macro-economic approach to the EU's regional policy and to the EU's external relations. The implementation of this project will raise the rank of the Danube region which aspires to the position of the third (alongside the Mediterranean Sea and the Baltic Sea regions) main pillar of the EU's regional involvement.

The implementation of the new strategy could become a political challenge for the Eastern Partnership (EaP), even though it is to be complementary to the latter. It should not lead to cutting down the EaP's funding because the European Neighborhood and Partnership Instrument is not envisaged as the principal source of financing the strategy. Yet it cannot be ruled out that the Danube strategy will complicate the task of raising of additional funds for the Partnership, in particular in the course of determining the financial framework for 2014–2020. It will make EU states with more modest aspirations in respect of the EU's eastern neighborhood (e.g. Hungary) less interested in the implementation of the EaP. The strategy will be targeted at the Western Balkan states, which the Danube basin EU members regard as one of their priorities. It is also meant to embrace Moldova and Ukraine, to foster the tightening of their contacts with the Union in the group of countries which the authorities in Kishinev and Kiev are likely to find more attractive than the EaP. It should be borne in mind that maintaining high interest in the Eastern Partnership will be rather difficult now that Spain, and subsequently Belgium, are due to succeed the Swedish presidency of the EU Council, for it is safe to presume that these countries will not put the development of the EaP high on their list of priorities and, such being the case, they will not need to give any particular attention to it.

For the Danube states the new strategy will be a more important challenge than the implementation of the EaP. Austria traditionally sees the initiation and furtherance of regional projects as the most effective instrument of building up its position in the EU. Since for Austria—and for Romania as well—the strengthening of links between the EU and the Black Sea region (e.g. through the implementation of the Black Sea Synergy) is important, they could encourage the EU to elevate the rank of the Danube strategy, on the grounds that it serves that end better than the EaP. Hungary, which will precede Poland in holding the presidency of the EU Council in 2011, is likely to put more emphasis on the implementation of the strategy than of the Eastern Partnership. Indeed, Hungary has already announced that during its presidency it will call a high-level conference of the Danube basin states.

Conclusions for Poland. The adoption of the strategy could diminish the importance of the EaP as a meaningful forum for the implementation of the EU's Eastern policy, thus limiting Poland's scope for influencing the shaping of that policy. The contemporaneous functioning of the Baltic and the Danube strategies will contribute to the widening of gap between the Republic of Poland and the other Visegrad group states, making the realization of Polish interests in Eastern Europe more difficult and reducing opportunities for rallying the region's states' support for the EaP.

Poland should use the period of Swedish presidency to work towards the perpetuation of the EU's political support for the EaP and to solicit funds for that initiative. By putting forth—together with Sweden—the Partnership project and by involving in the establishment of the Baltic strategy Poland confirmed its interest in the development in the EU of a macro-regional approach, benefitting the Union's cohesion. Accordingly, resistance to the Danube strategy could be counter-productive. Instead, Poland should seek to engage in its creation, with the aim of securing a synergy of the Baltic and Danube strategies that will benefit the EU and desirable proportions in the EU's activities directed at its neighbors under the Danube strategy and under the EaP. The Visegrad Group, which actively supported the establishment of the EaP, stands out as a natural instrument for political consensus-building on this matter. The Czech Republic in particular is Poland's important ally in the programming and delineating the Union's regional initiatives. The Czech Republic does not agree to the Partnership's being weakened by the implementation of the Danube strategy. Also, Poland's higher involvement in supporting the integration aspirations of the Western Balkan states—beneficiaries of the Danube project—would enhance the effectiveness of Poland's influence in Central Europe.