



**STATEMENT OF THE COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS AND
OVERSIGHT OF THE EUROPEAN FUNDS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE EU DANUBE REGION STRATEGY**

At a sitting, held on November 23, 2011, the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds (CEAOEF) discussed the **EU Strategy for the Danube Region**, included as item 60 of the Annual Work Programme (AWP) on EU Affairs (2011) of the Bulgarian Parliament.

After the discussion on the **EU Strategy for the Danube Region**, the **Bulgarian Parliament via the Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds expresses the following Statement**, which is to be sent to the European Institutions:

Regarding the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

The Committee on European Affairs and Oversight of the European Funds (the Committee) supports the implementation of the regional strategies at EU level and deems it expedient to have the regional level of reasoning and planning as a priority of the debates on the new programmatic period 2014-2020. The specific needs of entire regions would stand out better in the context of regional planning by maintaining the algorithm of **vision-strategy-plans-programs** in relation to the implementation of the Danube Strategy priorities. Furthermore, as a body that has always based its work on the principle of **dual democratic control**, the Committee welcomes the processes of public discussion of the document and encourages the continuity of debate with all stakeholders, maintaining **the following view**:

1. The Committee considers the **‘connectivity’** priority axis a prerequisite for good cooperation among the states participating in the Strategy as well as for implementation of successful projects based on regional principle. Connectivity means **mobility** whereas the shortcut to achieving mobility is the **physical construction and optimization of the entire infrastructural network**. Improving the accessibility and mobility in the region would become possible only through implementation of projects within the **Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T)** framework.

It is highly imperative for our country to focus on **improving the economic effectiveness of navigation along the Danube River, including the growth of ports along the river valley and their transformation into intermodal logistics hubs**.

In this connection and in order to meet the challenges arising from the implementation of the large-scale Danube strategy, **we urge that the resources allocated to Bulgaria under the Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund for infrastructural projects**

focused on the construction of basic infrastructure should not be reduced in the period 2014-2020.

- 2. The Committee urges and we shall monitor whether the implementation of the Danube Region Strategy is well in line with the new Connecting Europe Facility, so that further value could be added to the goals of Europe 2020 Strategy for greener transport, enhanced high speed broadband connections and wider use of energy from renewable sources.**
- 3. The Committee believes that setting up a modern infrastructure would contribute for overcoming the physical barriers as well as for enhanced accessibility and proximity that would help overcome substantial stereotypes, build stronger confidence and will for interaction and mutual aid among the citizens of the region.** This in turn would facilitate the process of development and the European perspective for political integration of the countries from South-East Europe. In this context, Bulgaria has been entrusted with the responsible **role of co-coordinator, together with Romania, on enhancing the activities in the field of culture and tourism and the direct people-to-people contacts.** These **joint activities** open a window of excellent opportunities for a full-fledged socio-economic integration of the newest EU member-states, which share their cultural and historic development with the older EU member-states while adding value to the countries in progress and a European perspective for the candidate and potential candidate-countries.
- 4. The Committee welcomes the efforts and initiatives of the participating countries in the context of priority axis ‘socio-economic and cultural integration’.** The European citizens residing in the Danube Region are a sterling resource that could fully unlock the potential of the 14 participating states; hence the focus of the Strategy implementation should be laid on people’s prosperity by enhancing their employment and education opportunities aimed at improving the standards of living in the region as a whole. **To achieve sustainable progress and growth the region needs to invest in human resources while focusing on knowledge and social inclusion. The latter is of utmost priority with a view of the fact that the region is home to one third of the EU at risk-of-poverty population, substantial part of which belongs to socially marginalized groups.**
- 5. The Committee believes that in order to attain the sustainable development goals and with a view of the consequences for the Danube River and the adjacent territories of the October 2010 Hungarian events, qualified as an environmental disaster, the Strategy member states have to fully commit to joint activities for environment protection and prevention of future hazardous situations.** Along these lines, Bulgaria is faced with a particular need of concerted measures especially in the wake of the 2006-2007 floodings. **Improving the quality of Danube water, preventing illicit waste dumping into the river, waste water treatment, water and sewerage network construction in the Danubian towns and villages are all issues of importance to Bulgaria.** The regional cooperation should facilitate the processes of green infrastructure development, implementation of long-term ecosystem-based solutions and drawing useful lessons from past experience.

6. Regarding the Europe 2020 Strategy indicators for R&D activities, the Committee recognizes the necessity of carrying out transnational initiatives in support of innovations, including: scientific exchanges, setting up and developing research centers and programs, projects backing the cooperation among universities, higher institutes, vocational schools and other educational establishments in European context, as well as improving the interaction among education institutions and research and innovation centers, building partnership networks and incentivizing the public-private partnerships.
7. The Committee believes **that the competitiveness of the Danube basin economies could be enhanced through better connectivity among the 14 Danube Region countries, a goal attainable by way of setting up state-of-the-art transport and telecommunication networks, energy grids and investment in education and innovation. The opportunities for improved transport communications would create preconditions for raising the labor market flexibility in the region and for increasing the number of small and medium-sized enterprises through joint capital investment.**
8. **The Committee takes notice that the EU Danube Region Strategy implementation on the available EU funds provides a first-class opportunity for exercising an integrated approach and conscious search for synergetic effect of the individual programs, facilities and other sources of financing.** To this date our country has demonstrated its ability to successfully apply the **cross-financing** method which adds value to the outcomes. To achieve sustainability of the EU funds absorption it is necessary in the Danube Region to pursue streamlining of the institutional capacity as well as the governance mechanisms and procedures along with their harmonization and standardization with a view to the implementation of large scale projects of mutual interest. The Committee recommends to the partners to focus their efforts on capacity and domestic potential strengthening at regional and local level that would encourage undertaking more adequate and active measures for involvement in the Danube Strategy. Given the geopolitical and cultural-historical proximity among the Balkan states of the Danube Region, it is relevant to proceed with the strengthening of partnership approach and exchange of best practices.
9. **In the framework of its activities during the Hungarian EU Presidency, the Committee** welcomes the adoption of the EU Danube Region Strategy and at the same believes that with a view of the potential EU enlargement, the enhanced political and economic integration of the Union as well as the remaining two years of the current programming period, **the Strategy should remain among the priorities of the forthcoming EU presidencies as well.** In order to achieve in practice the goals set in the priority exes, each participating country should pursue to the best of its abilities its action plan by carrying out specific projects.
10. The Committee gives prominence to its satisfaction with the **detailed planning of the development projects and recommends having them updated more frequently than envisaged by the EU Commission** in order to better reflect the specific needs of the

region and their feasibility. What is more, the Committee encourages **a wider publicity of the project activities related to the Danube Strategy implementation and expresses its confidence that the communication plan shall reflect not only the information needs of the public at large, but of the potential beneficiaries as well.**

- 11. The Committee welcomes Bulgaria's commitment to the eleventh and last priority for cooperation aimed at coping with security and organized crime related issues** where our country is co-coordinator with Germany. Assuming the coordination of this priority area ensues from Bulgaria's aspirations, efforts and real achievements along its path to Schengen and provides a precious opportunity for our country to manifest its capability of being a guarantor of stability and security in the region especially in the context of our forthcoming accession to Schengen, defined as the country's top foreign policy priority. The **successful** coping with the role of co-coordinator in this priority area is determined by our **technical preparedness for Schengen membership**, which is already a proven fact.