

Joint Statement of the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Zagreb, 22 October 2020

We, the Ministers responsible for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (hereinafter referred to as "EUSDR"), gathered on 22 October 2020 at the occasion of the 9th Annual Forum of the EUSDR, jointly organised by the Republic of Croatia, the European Commission and the Danube Transnational Programme with the support of the Danube Strategy Point, agree on the following joint statement:

2020, from many perspectives an extraordinary year, was planned to mark and celebrate the 10th anniversary of the EUSDR. However, at the very beginning of this year we were quickly thrust into an unprecedented crisis caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Most of our plans had to be reshaped and we needed to swiftly shift our focus and priorities to the safety of our citizens.

To make matters worse, parts of the Danube Region were hit by earthquakes. The capital of the EUSDR presiding country, Zagreb was hit by the strongest earthquake on record since 140 years. However, in spite of everything that happened, including lockdowns across Europe, difficult circumstances that arose and the challenges we face, we remain focused and press ahead with the same common spirit and endeavour.

We are aware that crises and challenges can offer new opportunities for adapting our priorities and for further stepping up the overall coordination effort. Therefore, we are determined to respond to changes, promote stronger recovery measures, cohesion and convergence in order to foster the wellbeing of our citizens. We are open to follow the trends, to respond to changes and to strengthen the Danube Region's resilience.

We strongly advocate for solidarity and a firm cooperation within existing structures to tackle the existing and emerging challenges in the Danube Region in a positive spirit of coordination and collaboration across borders. We underline the importance of strengthening the roles of sustainable regional development, creating synergies between macro-regional strategies and the Cohesion Policy.

We welcome the revised EUSDR Action Plan, which will better support the achievement of the goals of the European Union, and recognise the joint efforts of all stakeholders and implementers who have contributed to its completion. We confirm our political support to the implementation of set objectives, actions and targets, as answers to several emerging challenges of the Danube Region.

We welcome the endorsed EUSDR Governance Architecture Document, initiated by the Croatian EUSDR Presidency, which outlines the roles and responsibilities of the EUSDR stakeholders and implementers and acknowledge that it will contribute to a better guidance within the Strategy.

We support the process of embedding the EUSDR objectives and actions into the Partnership Agreements and 2021–2027 European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), programmes, equivalent instruments for non-EU countries as well as centrally managed EU programmes. EU financial means targeted to the EUSDR objectives are key factors in improving the coherence and well-being of the participating states of the Danube Region. However, we acknowledge that additional efforts are needed to ensure an adequate Embedding process and proper discussion with the relevant programming authorities. Moreover, we commit to monitor the process at national and regional levels and invite the European Commission to monitor and support the implementation process on macro-regional level.

We welcome the new format of meetings of the Presidencies of the EU macro-regional strategies, first held in Brussels in February 2020 on the initiative of the Croatian EUSDR Presidency, and we reiterate the need to exchange and share best practices with other macro-regional strategies.

We recognise the role of the European Commission as a key strategic advisor, including the role of the Danube Strategy Point as an essential support structure in all these governance processes. We recognise the key role of the National Coordinators in the Strategy governance and continue to rely on their commitment to the EUSDR development. We also recognise the key role of the Priority Area Coordinators and the Steering Groups towards the implementation of the Strategy's goals and to drive forward the overall process of the implementation of EUSDR actions. We trust on continuing this fruitful collaboration based on reliable mutual communication among all stakeholders.

We call upon the European Commission, National Coordinators, Priority Area Coordinators, Danube Transnational Programme and Danube Strategy Point to work closely together, involving the authorities responsible for the relevant national and regional programmes co-funded by the EU, in order to facilitate the cooperation within the EUSDR Priority Areas. To this end, the creation of a permanent network for exchange with the authorities responsible for those programmes will be essential.

We recognize the role of the EUSDR and other macro-regional strategies as key implementers of the European Green Deal. The European Green Deal is a blueprint for systemic modernisation across policy, society and economy.

Regarding the financial period 2021 – 2027, we support all efforts in projects focused on resilience and development through the Recovery plan for Europe. We believe that the implementation of joint projects among participating states should encourage sustainable development, digitalisation and innovation, as well focus on health aspects, especially in these challenging times, while taking into account the already set conditions and procedures for the implementation of the Strategy in EUSDR Member States (including the roles and responsibilities of individual entities).

We also reaffirm our strong support for the advancement of the EU enlargement process and the opportunities opened by EUSDR activities in supporting the reforms. The Zagreb Summit in May this year reaffirmed once again the Region's EU perspective and the added value of the enlargement process. The Zagreb Declaration, the Sofia Declaration and relevant Council conclusions remain important references for our future work in this regard. This includes the pledge of all partners to uphold European values and principles and to carry out necessary reforms. EU-assistance will be linked to tangible results in the reform process. Additionally,

the Eastern Partnership remains of strategic importance for the EUSDR in building a common area of shared democracy, rule of law, prosperity, stability and a healthy environment.

We stress the importance of the exchange of information about implemented mechanisms and good practices to ensure the success of the cooperation of the participating states through the EUSDR and we agree to take further steps to:

- Improve the visibility of the EUSDR through a more strategic and comprehensive approach, including the promotion of implemented projects, processes and the overall achievements,
- Reinforce a stronger common political will as a key endorser of all the activities, especially at the national level,
- Strengthen the support and widen the stakeholder platform, which includes a broad spectre of actors in particular better participation and involvement of the younger generation in the Danube Region (as discussed at the Danube Participation Day),
- Ensure the continuity of engagement on all levels in order to maximize the efficiency and impact of the EUSDR.

In conclusion, we reconfirm our political engagement and will continue to rally our efforts to provide opportunities to strengthen cooperation within the EUSDR, as well as to define key guidelines for further development of the Strategy, unlocking the full potential of the Danube Region.