



Strengthening Mutual Understanding between Cultures and Religions in the Danube Region

Joint Contribution of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CSC of CEC), of the Secretariat of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) and of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)

**to the Public Consultation on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region
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As it prepares an EU Strategy for the Danube Region, the European Commission has invited contributions from all interested stakeholders. The churches welcome the opportunity to bring into the process their views and their experiences in cross-border cooperation in the whole Danube region. At the same time, we see this as a contribution to the "open, transparent and regular dialogue" between the Union and the churches as specified in Art 17 of the consolidated Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

1. Main Challenges and Opportunities

1.1 Culture and Identity

The Danube Region is rich and diverse in its identities and cultural heritage. This is one of its major assets but also one of the key challenges. While there is a gap in economic strength between the Western and Eastern part of the Danube basin which is clearly visible, there are also divisions in terms of identity and culture that are less clearly visible but deeply rooted in the region's communities. There is still a legacy of division, and the fact of peace at the moment cannot be taken for granted.

National identities in the countries along the Danube have traditionally been shaped by religious or denominational adherence. Religious identities have played a part in several of the conflicts the Southern and Eastern Danube region has experienced over the past two decades. The nations and communities along the Danube may share a common history but they do not seem to have a common interpretation of their history. Strengthening mutual understanding between cultures and religions in the Danube area is a prerequisite of further growth and development in the area, socially and economically.

The churches and ecumenical bodies at an early stage recognised the potential of religious communities for building bridges and led the way in establishing structures and partnerships that brought together people from a range of denominational backgrounds. There is now a range of church networks and partnerships that offer opportunities for co-operation and growth in mutual understanding within the region.

As societies along the Danube change in the wake or in expectation of EU enlargement, churches and religious communities have themselves entered into processes of transformation that affect the way civil society can further develop in the respective regions or countries. These processes have to be integrated into the whole region's cultural and societal development in a productive way.

1.2 Human Rights Including Minority Rights

Human rights are a responsibility of society as a whole. Especially non-government actors have done much to promote the protection of human rights. On the level of governance, it is in regions and cities that human rights need to be nurtured, and local, regional and national authorities have a key role to play in their day-to-day application. This particular role of governance needs to be taken into account. Increased awareness and possibly new monitoring mechanisms can support the authorities concerned in their effort to improve the fundamental rights situation.

Particular attention has to be paid to the situation of the Roma communities. This is a challenge both in terms of human rights and of identity and culture.

1.3 Environment

The Danube region is rich also in its natural resources, being endowed with the Danube and its tributary rivers as resources of water and as habitats for a wide range of species. These resources have to be protected as the basis for prosperity and well-being of the people living in the region and as a gift entrusted to humanity and to be preserved for future generations. A sense of stewardship needs to be developed that can be the basis for a sensitive and careful approach towards nature.

The navigability and energy security may have to be improved along the river and in the basin as a whole, but this has to be implemented in a sustainable way in all cases, preserving the region's biodiversity and considering the use of renewable energies. Raising sensitivity for environmental issues is also an educational challenge.

2. Topics to be Covered

We are convinced that a large part of the effort has to be put into human development. The success of further integration in the Danube area as well as growth and prosperity will depend on taking into account the region's diverse cultural legacy and on the strengthening of civil society across the region.

At the same time, sustainable and environmentally responsible development of the region must be a major focus of the strategy.

Topics to be covered by EUSDR should therefore include:

- Reconciliation work. The strategy should explore ways to bring together people from the various communities to share their different perceptions of common history and to

grow in mutual understanding. It also should encourage and support academic collaboration to develop material and methods for the multipliers of reconciliation in and between the different countries, religions and ethnic groups in the region.

- Integration of minorities. The religious or denominational aspect of minority identities should be taken into account as it is one key for harnessing the potential that lies in cultural diversity. A particular focus has to be on the situation of Roma communities and their integration in society.
- Promotion and protection human rights. The strategy should consider ways to nourish the awareness for human rights on a local and regional level. This also includes minority rights and aspects of gender justice and equality.
- Balance between ecology and transport. Improvement of navigability and development of road and railway corridors have to be balanced with preservation of natural resources and habitats.
- Renewable energies. The same is true for the improvement of energy security. Sources of renewable energy and innovative ways to save energy have to be explored to improve protection of biodiversity.
- Inclusion of civil society organisations. Both in human development and in environmental issues, civil society can contribute substantially to the development and implementation of the strategy. The strategy should make clear that their contribution is welcome and that they can take responsibility in the process.
- Education. This includes education with a focus on ethics and citizenship responsibility which is also a means of combating corruption, as well as education to raise environmental awareness.

While so-called “hard” infrastructure or economic issues are doubtless important, they must not push aside the “soft” issues that are so significant for developing the region’s potential.

3. Concrete Actions and Projects

The churches have already made significant contributions to reconciliation and promotion of mutual understanding by developing structures and projects that particularly involve the Danube area. These projects can serve as models for the action plan or might provide a basis for the involvement of civil society in EUSDR flagship projects.

Non-government stakeholders can and should be entrusted with leadership of EUSDR projects. It is important that the action plan also includes a framework for smaller projects. These often have a relevant impact on a local level and must not be excluded from EU funding by being too small or too inexpensive to be included as flagship projects.

3.1 Reconciliation

People have to be brought together for whom the scars from previous conflicts and conflicting views on history have become part of their identity. This task requires action both on a communal and on an academic level.

Best Practice Example

“Healing of Memories” is a large project seeking to build bridges between the different denominational and national cultures in the area. It involves a process of the three steps of walking together through history, taking share in the pain of others, and preparing the future together. This happens both at international conferences and at a local, grassroots level for which people from the communities are specifically trained. Having successfully been carried out in Romania, it is now being extended into a range of countries in the Danube basin, also reaching out into Bosnia and Serbia and to the Roma community. Having started as a CPCE and CEC project, it is now lead by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and supported by a foundation. The project is well documented, a number of publications have appeared in the past years. — www.healingofmemories.ro

3.2 Roma Communities

The situation of Roma is still difficult in a large part of the Danube region. Projects that open community boundaries and bring together Roma and people from other communities are particularly important.

Best Practice Example

RGDtS (Roma-Gadje-Dialogue through service initiative) is a long-term commitment to improving the situation of Roma in European society through giving Roma, especially from communities in Central and Eastern Europe opportunities to journey outside their own communities to volunteer in social, environmental and cultural projects in Eastern, central and Western Europe that will broaden their knowledge and skills and enable them to contribute to the further development of their communities and the situation of Roma in general after their service, and putting non-Roma (Gadje) volunteers into local community projects involving Roma for one or two years and their engagement after their voluntary service in public education activities in their own countries and regions. RGDtS is supported by a range of individual churches and Christian organisations. — www.rgdts.net

3.3 Education and Ethics

Through educational actions, the strategy can contribute to democracy and citizens’ participation and to a sense of citizenship responsibility, of European identity, and of ownership of the EU among the citizens. It should create opportunities for learning mobility for young people, especially for citizens of non-EU-countries of the region. A lively learning exchange between young people of the Danube countries and beyond should be established, complemented by lifelong learning programmes for adults, in accordance with the aims of the EU framework “Education and Training 2020”. Projects to raise environmental awareness are also necessary.

Best Practice Example

The Social Seminar is an educational programme aimed at encouraging people to take responsibility in society. To this end it offers comprehensive political and social education, enabling its students to make informed decisions with a clear ethical focus. Social Seminars have been offered by Roman Catholic dioceses in Germany for the past 60 years. They are traditionally founded upon Catholic social teaching, promoting justice and human dignity. An interreligious Social Seminar is currently being developed for Serbia with the support of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, thus adapting a successful model to the challenges of the region.

Best Practice Example

Ecumenical network of Institutes of Christian Social Ethics in Southeastern Europe: The aim of this network is the closer cooperation of academics in the fields of social ethics and social teaching. Through seminars and publications they want to raise awareness concerning the common history, the fractures and ruptures in this history, religion as reason for and remedy against conflict and violence and to develop material and methods for a successful „Healing of memories“.

3.4 Raising Awareness of Common Responsibility

To achieve a sense of common responsibility more deeply rooted in the whole area, small projects can be particularly helpful.

Best Practice Example

As part of the World Council of Churches (WCC) “Decade to Overcome Violence” churches along the Danube are organising a process called DonauFriedensWelle (Danube Wave of Peace). Aimed at growing together in understanding and peace as well as in environmental responsibility, it involves events of worship and celebration, competitions in literature and poetry, and a closing conference. Results will be brought into the WCC International Peace Convocation in 2011. DonauFriedensWelle is organised by Lutheran churches but on the local level includes a wide range of denominations. While this project is particular in its Christian focus and limited in its scope and time frame, it can serve as a model how communities can be encouraged to develop cross-border initiatives and create a sense of responsibility for the region.

3.5 Strengthening Environmental Networks

While developing the Danube region in an environmentally sustainable way is a particular responsibility of the different tiers of governance, it is the civil society environmental networks that ensure environmental awareness is rooted in society as a whole. Their experience and knowledge will be immensely valuable for the implementation of EUSDR. The strategy will have to take into account the whole range of existing NGO environmental networks and encourage them to take responsibility for concrete actions.

Best Practice Example

The European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) is a church network promoting co-operation in caring for creation. As ecological threats transcend national and confessional boundaries, the aim of ECEN is to share information and experiences in environmental work among widely varied Christian traditions and to encourage a common witness in caring for God's creation. ECEN is the main working instrument of the Conference of European Churches for addressing the need for environmental engagement and responding to climate change. ECEN works closely with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and with the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE). The Danube region is an area where a number of local trans-border initiatives are taking place and are planned for the future. — www.ecen.org

4. Evaluating the Approach

4.1 Advantages of a Transnational Approach

The development of EUSDR as a transnational strategy is a necessary step since many issues can only be addressed on a transregional and transnational level. The churches' ex-

perience shows that cross-border cooperations and networks in the region are immensely valuable but need patience and time to grow.

Involvement of the EU in the process brings an added value as it brings EU resources of policy-making and funding. It offers the opportunity to adjust EU policy better to the needs of citizens in the region. EU involvement also encourages communities in the candidate and non-member countries to learn “by doing” how EU mechanisms work and thus increase mutual understanding on a governance level. While some regions’ and states’ non-papers have emphasized the difference between member and non-member states in the process, we are convinced that the issues at stake require non-member states to take responsibility as a precondition for the successful drawing up and implementation of EUSDR.

As EUSDR includes EU members and non-member states, as well as former “Western” and “Eastern” countries, we expect it to bring forward the process of European integration. However, the “integration process is not just a one-way journey ... it should [be] a two-way process, recognising and respecting different ways of life, different traditions and cultures” (CSC/CEC, European integration. A way forward?, 2009, p. 41).

4.2 The Value of an Integrated Strategy

The churches welcome the integrated approach that brings together a range of issues and pays attention to how they are interrelated. We consider it essential that the issues of culture and identity are taken up in the EUSDR. These issues have been the main reason for many of the problems and conflicts the region has experienced in the past decades and they are the key to establishing a culture of mutual understanding and respect. The understandable urge to produce quick results must not undermine the sustainability of all measures in the action plan. Common growth needs time and patience.

4.3 The Contribution of EUSDR

By focusing policy on the common needs of citizens and communities in the Danube region, EUSDR can provide a framework for growth in common identity and make a lasting contribution to the region’s well-being and prosperity. To achieve this, all the relevant stakeholders have to be brought together – this includes enabling civil society to play an active role in the planned strategy and to contribute to the process with its specific experience.

5. Implementing the Strategy

5.1 Cooperation and Exchange of Good Practices, Expectations of EU Policies

EUSDR can be a major help for the development of a culturally diverse yet integrated Danube region. Neither new bureaucratic or legislative structures nor new financial resources appear necessary for this goal, if the existing resources are handled in a transparent and responsible way.

Especially the annual review of EUSDR and the inclusion of new projects in the action plan have to happen in an open and transparent process involving not only the member states and EU institutions but also the relevant stakeholders from civil society and non-member states. This is crucial as the current time frame is too short for many stakeholders to come up with well-documented projects in the first round of the making of EUSDR.

5.2 Funding of the Projects

Projects that work on educational, cultural and identity issues are relatively inexpensive. The focus on “flagship” projects must not exclude small projects from EU funding. The EUSDR should therefore provide a framework for smaller projects within the action plan.

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The Church and Society Commission (CSC) is one of the commissions of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The CSC links CEC's some 125 member churches from all over Europe and its associated organisations with the European Union's institutions, the Council of Europe, the OSCE, NATO and the UN (on European matters). Its task is to help the churches study church and society questions from a theological social-ethical perspective, especially those with a European dimension, and to represent common positions of the member churches in their relations with political institutions working in Europe.

The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) is made up of Bishops delegated by the 26 Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the European Union. The objectives of COMECE are: to monitor and analyse the political process of the European Union, to inform and raise awareness within the Church of the development of EU policy and legislation, to maintain a regular Dialogue with the EU Institutions through annual Summit meetings of religious leaders, Dialogue Seminars, various Conferences and by taking part in Consultations launched by the European Commission, and to promote reflection, based on the Church's social teaching, on the challenges facing a united Europe.

Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE): At present 105 Protestant churches in Europe (including five South-American churches originating from Europe) belong to the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). Lutheran, Reformed, United and Methodist along with pre-Reformation churches grant each other pulpit and table fellowship on the basis of the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973.