

EUROPA - FORUM WACHAU

Abbey of Göttweig, June 25-27 2010

“The Danube Region within a new Europe”

Address of Mr. Gordan Jandroković

Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Croatia

Esteemed Right Reverend Luser,
Dear Minister Spindelegger,
Commissioner Hahn,
Governor of the State of Lower Austria,
Madam President of the Europa Forum Wachau,
Ladies and gentlemen Ministers,
Esteemed guests,

Allow me to begin by saying how delighted I am to be today at such a magnificent place. I would like to thank our hosts and organizers of this event for the warmest of welcomes and the opportunity they have given us to enjoy the splendour of the Göttweig Abbey. The outstanding aesthetic and cultural importance of this true landmark reaches far beyond the borders of the Land of Lower Austria.

This is a second time that I am here, first time as minister, and it is a particular pleasure and honour for me.

We have gathered here today to share our views on the main challenges and opportunities in the Danube Region. Our aim is to reach a new level of cooperation, coordination and exchange of good practices, to the mutual benefit of all the involved states and regions.

A year ago in Linz, almost on this exact date, I had the opportunity to take part in the discussion on how to build a sustainable future for the Danube Region. This was the very beginning of the process of introducing a new instrument for European macro-regional cooperation. From the outset, Croatia has been giving its full support to the development of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Danube River knows no boundaries, no administrative structures, no divisions of authority. Therefore, the main precondition for the success of the Strategy lies in the involvement of all countries in the Danube Basin.

And at this point I would like to commend the EU Member States and the European Commission for respecting the all-inclusiveness principle. For this is crucial.

So, why do we need such a Strategy?

Simply because everything is inter-dependant and every action yields a reaction. If we want to make it really sustainable, the keyword is team-play. And this again will certainly contribute to the strengthening of good neighbourly relations in the region.

For indeed, the river Danube has always represented one strong binding element for the many diverse cultures and peoples living along its banks. Regardless of the different histories, social or political systems: the Danube remained. It really was a common thread which weaved its way through those differing regions, thus creating a specific and unique area with a strong identity.

What is new today in this old Danube Region?

What we are witnessing is the emerging of a new paradigm, of a new method of multilateral cooperation. The Baltic Strategy introduced a concept. Now, taking the valuable experience of this effort, we are creating a comprehensive framework with the potential to immensely contribute to the overall well-being of our region.

Macro-regional strategies are prime test cases of what territorial cohesion means in practical terms. The objective is clear. We have highly contrasting living standards in our macro-region.

The essence of the EU regional policy – to improve and bring differing living standards to a similar level – is at hand here as well. Only this time the scale is different. Let me rephrase one popular motto. We have to “Think Local and Act Regional”! And it is precisely this bottom up approach which is another guiding principle nurtured by the European Commission, the driving force of our endeavour, while developing the Danube Strategy.

It is a matter of mutual interest. We want to give people from less developed areas a chance for a better life. And in order to do so, we have to create conditions for business and innovation which will ultimately enable this very growth. It is a perfect process.

If we want to truly act macro, or rather, trans-nationally, we simply cannot do it any other way but through thorough, honest and dedicated cooperation of all the relevant stakeholders: supranational, national and local; public and private. By working together and in a coordinated manner we will be able to fuel a more harmonized and stable development of the Region. This would inevitably lead to a better structured economic development, as outlined in the Europe 2020 strategy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Croatia as a Central European, Southeast European and a Mediterranean country perceives the Danube Strategy as a platform on which to accentuate its Danubian dimension. We understand the challenges, and the amount of energy needed. And if we keep the benefits in sight, all our efforts will be worthwhile. This is why we have given our full support to the first promoters of the idea of a new macro-regional approach to territorial cooperation.

Looking back, it seems that the greatest challenge for us has been to successfully connect and coordinate the many stakeholders of the Croatian Danube Region – the future beneficiaries of the Danube Strategy.

At this point I would like to briefly address a few points we in Croatia consider important for our future cooperation in the Danube Region. One of the priorities we have set for ourselves is the construction and reconstruction of, railway and road infrastructure, as parts of the broader European transport network. This priority derives from the fact that good transport infrastructure is the very drive of economic development in the world of today.

Passing through Pannonian Croatia, the major Pan-European railway Corridor X connects significant industrial and agricultural areas. Its modernization bears a large potential for economic development, for both Croatia, and the Danube Region as a whole. On a broader scale, the importance of including all the countries of South East Europe into the wider Trans-European network should not be underestimated. The countries of South East Europe are currently assessing the possibility to develop a joint reconstruction plan of the road and

railroad infrastructure in the region. This joint project would replace individual plans of each country involved. It clearly demonstrates another example of the commitment of the countries of South East Europe to regional cooperation. And as such we hope it will be supported by the EU and all relevant financial institutions.

I have just returned from the SEECP Summit in Istanbul where our commitment to regional cooperation has been reaffirmed once more. In order to further encourage all the positive developments in the region, we have also underlined the importance of keeping the goal of EU membership viable for all the countries in South East Europe once they have met the necessary preconditions and criteria. This has been and will remain a priority for Croatia.

Coming back to the Danube Strategy, another priority we have set for ourselves is to revive our inland waterways. Their specificity lies in the fact that most of them are rivers which follow Croatia's borders. In consequence, many projects need to be coordinated with the neighboring countries. And this is what we also consider the Danube Strategy to be – a chance to establish a coordinated cross-border and trans-national cooperation on the matters which are of importance and interest to a greater number of states.

Given the full potential of railway corridors and waterways that pass through Croatia, combined with our well developed road infrastructure, we can create a vital connection between Central Europe and the ports of the Adriatic Sea. This is not only important to Croatia. If we were to make this link faster and more reliable, it would most definitely also present a significant added value for the whole of the Danube Region.

With regard to the environmental issues, I believe the most recent developments in these parts of Europe speak for themselves. We in Croatia are still adding up the total costs of the vast floods we have had just recently. Many parts of eastern Croatia have suffered substantial damage in agricultural property, and many houses are in need of extensive renovation. And floods are just one, most immediate, aspect of the pressing need to take our environment into due consideration. Natural environment is one of the crucial assets in our economic and social capital with a direct impact on tourism. In both of these areas, environmental protection and tourism, we also see great potential for encouraging cross-border cooperation.

As for other projects, we should endorse those which aim at strengthening the sector of small and medium sized enterprises and which foster innovation and new technologies, as they are the very heart of economic progress.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to point out that Croatia regards the Danube Strategy as another dimension through which the cooperation with the countries in our immediate neighborhood can be further strengthened. It serves as an additional platform on which to promote regional partnership on our common European path.

It is incumbent upon us to strengthen our efforts in the promotion of regional economic cooperation through the most beneficial multilateral mechanisms, and through the engagement of the EU as well as other international institutions. The consolidation of the economic potential of the region, within the context of broader EU policies and priorities, should therefore be among our leading goals.

Acting as a bridge to Southeast Europe, Croatia is a strong proponent of a clear European perspective for all the countries of this region. I would like to emphasize that this perspective is crucial for the stability and progress of SEE, but at the same time the future of SEE is a question of European peace, security and global prestige.

With this in mind, Croatia has been dedicated to the sharing of its knowledge and experience with our south eastern neighbors, and it will continue to do so after joining the EU as its 28th Member State.

We are now in the final stage of our EU accession negotiations and determined to conclude their technical part by the end of this or the beginning of the following year, thus bringing our EU membership in 2012 within reach. To this end we will continue to conduct all the remaining reforms in judiciary, public administration, ecology and agriculture. Our wish and goal is to be one hundred percent prepared for the full membership when we join the EU.

Allow me to use this opportunity to thank the Republic of Austria and Minister Michael Spindelegger for all the support provided to Croatia in realizing our major foreign policy goal – membership in the EU.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The principles of cooperation and mutual understanding are imprinted into the cornerstones of the European Union of today. Nurturing these principles beyond its frontiers, the EU is paving the way for the emergence of the New Europe. And this is even more important as the interconnectedness of today's world is further diluting the borders. Our future success can be measured only by our readiness to recognize and define common denominators.

As the Danube connects us not only in geographical but also in terms of identity, this region has all the potentials to form a vital part of the new Europe we are about to build.

I am more than convinced that the Danube Strategy is a major step into the right direction.

Let us use it well.

Thank you for your attention.