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General Affairs

Luxembourg, 13 April 2011

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Main results of the Council

*The Council adopted conclusions on the EU's strategy for the **Danube region**, calling for its implementation to be launched without delay.*

The strategy is aimed at developing the economic potential of the Danube region and improving environmental conditions, putting existing EU instruments and resources to more efficient and effective use. It contains a detailed action plan aimed at:

- *better connecting the Danube region;*
- *improving environmental protection in the region;*
- *building prosperity in the Danube region;*
- *strengthening the Danube region (e.g. stepping up institutional capacity and cooperation to promote security and tackle organised crime).*

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- Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
- Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's Internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
- Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the Council's Internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

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Mr Johannes HAHN

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ITEMS DEBATED

EUROPEAN COUNCIL

The Council took stock of the follow-up to the European Council's meetings held since the beginning of the year.

At its meetings on 4 February, 11 March and 24-25 March, the European Council focused on economic policy, energy, including nuclear safety, innovation and developments in the EU's southern neighbourhood.

STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION

The Council discussed the EU's strategy for the Danube region and adopted the following conclusions:

"THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

1. RECAPITULATING the European Council Conclusions of 18-19 June 2009, ACKNOWLEDGING the Commission's Communication concerning the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region and COMMENDING the European Commission (hereinafter referred to as 'the Commission') on their extensive consultation process conducted when preparing the Communication;
2. WELCOMING the innovative and integrated approach in addressing challenges of common aspiration within the EU through macro-regional strategies, based on the experience gained from the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region as well as future experiences of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and their synergies and RECOGNISING that Member States participate in these strategies and any possible future macro-regional strategies on a voluntary basis;
3. TAKING NOTE of declarations, conclusions adopted and consultations conducted in Ulm (6 May 2009 and 1-2 February 2010), in Budapest (25-26 February 2010), in Vienna and Bratislava (19-21 April 2010), in Ruse (10-11 May 2010), in Constanta (9-11 June 2010) and in Bucharest (8 November 2010);
4. RECOGNISING the potential of territorial strategies, in this particular case at the macro regional level, for contributing to the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU, for achieving EU objectives, for enhancing the importance of sustainable development and for helping to adapt to future challenges facing the EU;
5. STRESSING that macro-regional strategies are based on the principle no new EU funds, no additional EU formal structures and no new EU legislation;
6. REITERATING that the Strategy is financially neutral, through its coordinated approach, aims at a more efficient and effective use of existing EU instruments and funds, as well as other existing resources and financial instruments;
7. WELCOMING the active cooperation of all interested international, national and regional organisations, regional and local communities in areas where actions of mutual interest can be identified, respecting the initiatives of the civil society;
8. RECOGNISING the common challenges and the specific conditions of the different States concerned as identified in the Strategy;
9. ACKNOWLEDGING the contribution the EU Strategy for the Danube Region can make to the further integration of the internal market and to economic, social and territorial cohesion, as well as its contribution to fostering cooperation with third countries in the Danube river basin, and its assistance to participating candidate and potential candidate countries on their European path;

10. ENDORSES the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and TAKES NOTE of the annexed Action Plan that was elaborated by the Commission on the basis of a consultation with the Member States, third countries and other stakeholders;
11. STRESSES that the EU Strategy for the Danube Region has a strategic framework guided by the Europe 2020 Strategy and the European Sustainable Development Strategy, thus its potential to contribute to long-term objectives, such as to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and competitiveness of the European Union is ensured;
12. STRESSES that the application of existing funds and financial instruments supporting the involvement of third countries participating in the implementation of the Strategy should be fully aligned with relevant external EU strategies and policies which also determine the relevant external lending mandates of the European Investment Bank.
13. STRESSES the importance of due involvement of all EU Member States and all interested stakeholders on transnational, regional and local level, as appropriate, in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.
14. While stressing the primarily internal character of the strategy and the necessity to preserve the integrity of the EU decision making, ACKNOWLEDGES that the inclusion and participation of third countries is crucial if the desired objectives of the strategy are to be achieved;
15. STRESSES that the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region should be launched without delay and AGREES that a governance structure for the implementation and follow-up of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is required, therefore ENCOURAGES Member States concerned and in particular their National Contact Points and their Priority Area coordinators to facilitate the start of the implementation. Based on the first experiences of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
 - a. INVITES the National Contact Points and the Priority Area Coordinators, in close cooperation with the Commission and with due involvement of participating third countries:
 - to establish a network, where appropriate, consisting of the national counterparts relevant to each Priority Area Coordinators;
 - to identify the possible relevant stakeholders, with particular emphasis on Project Leaders;
 - to provide relevant information on the Strategy to the citizens, including to associate civil society concerned and to promote public awareness;
 - to examine the Commission's target examples and to find agreement on realistic and feasible targets relevant to the macro-region with the involvement of the Commission and all relevant stakeholders ;
 - to promote the cross-sectoral approach of the Strategy, on the basis of the acquis communautaire relevant to the Priority Areas of the Strategy;
 - to compile a list of on-going projects and possible project ideas under the respective Priority Areas. This list shall be continuously updated during the implementation and also be included into the first Progress Report issued by the Commission by the end of 2012;

- to provide assistance to Lead Partners in order to facilitate the implementation of projects and the further development and screening of project ideas. This assistance shall emphasize available European funding opportunities and rules and make full use of already existing sources of information. During the implementation of individual actions and projects the voluntary nature of participation should be preserved.

b. INVITES the Commission:

- to play a leading role in the strategic coordination of the key delivery stages of the Strategy, in partnership with the Member States and in accordance with the subsidiarity principle;
- to safeguard an involvement of stakeholders concerned from all levels in the region, for example through an annual forum with the aim of helping the Commission in its tasks;
- to provide the Member States, regions concerned and participating third countries in the Strategy with a continuous assistance and guidance on good practices in cross-border, transnational and interregional coordination and implementation;
- to take the objectives of the Strategy into account in relevant policy initiatives and programme planning, without prejudice to the negotiations and decisions of the next multi-annual financial framework;
- to set-up in line with the Communication of the Commission an High-Level Group of officials from all EU Member States in order to assist the Commission in the task of facilitating the implementation of the Strategy. Third countries participating in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region should be invited;
- to regularly report to the High Level Group on the implementation of the agreed actions and the evaluation of results, as well as amendments and updates of the Action Plan in a Progress Report, by no later than end of 2012 in the first instance;
- to regularly inform the Council on the progress made and on the Communication and a revised Action Plan, by June 2013 in the first instance;

16. INVITES the Commission and the Member States concerned to support the aims of the Strategy by facilitating the coordination of existing EU funds and instruments and by simplifying the relevant rules of implementation to enable quick and effective project generation and implementation, with the potential support of financial institutions relevant for the realisation and funding of the Strategy.
17. RECOGNISES the administrative and technical burden put onto the Member States and in particular onto the Priority Area Coordinators when launching the Strategy, therefore CALLS ON the Commission and other EU institutions as well as the Member States concerned to explore and identify ways of providing technical assistance within available financial resources to ease the start of implementation.

18. INVITES the Member States concerned and the Commission to explore the possible interconnections and synergies between the two existing macro-regional strategies, namely the EU Strategies for the Baltic Sea Region and the Danube Region. CALLS ON the European Commission to ensure on this basis the coherent development of both macro-regions, including infrastructural connections between them.
19. CALLS UPON the Member States concerned and the Commission to ensure full transparency and visibility as far as the implementation process and further development of the Strategy is concerned and to disseminate to all Member States information, good practices and lessons learned, on the basis of experiences acquired, in view of possible future macro-regional strategies.
20. Considering the results achieved as well as experiences and good practices acquired during the implementation of existing macro-regional strategies, INVITES the Commission to clarify the concept of macro-regional strategies, to evaluate their value added and submit the outcomes to the Council and the European Parliament by June 2013.
21. INVITES the Member States in cooperation with the Commission to continue to work on possible future macro-regional strategies."

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED**FOREIGN AFFAIRS****Croatia - Stabilisation and association agreement**

The Council approved a draft decision, to be adopted by the EU-Croatia Stabilisation and Association Council, on amendments to a protocol to the EU-Croatia stabilisation and association agreement concerning the definition of the concept of "originating products" and methods of administrative cooperation.

The decision will be adopted by written procedure.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL AFFAIRS**Saint-Barthélemy - Monetary agreement**

The Council adopted a decision on the arrangements for the negotiation of a monetary agreement with the French Republic, acting on behalf of its overseas collectivity of Saint-Barthélemy.

The negotiation of a monetary agreement is necessary to maintain the use of the euro in Saint-Barthélemy after its forthcoming change in legal status, as of 1 January 2012, from an outermost region of the EU to that of an overseas territory.

The monetary agreement would cover monetary, banking and financial legislation and measures to prevent fraud, counterfeiting and money-laundering.
