
EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION AND THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) was officially launched in June 2011 and welcomed by all actors in the region for its integrated approach as a result of a large consultation with the relevant stakeholders. Apart from the eight participating states which are EU members (Germany, Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria), four states are in different stages of negotiations for entering EU (Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro) while two others are neighbouring countries (Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova) are part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) (Figure 1).

From its very beginning the Strategy has underlain the necessity of reinforcing certain major EU policy initiatives, “Europe 2020” being considered of a special importance in this context. Moreover, there is in the final part of the document a small section entitled “Links with EU Policies” in which the Europe 2020 agenda is more detailed and transport, energy and biodiversity, among others, are referred to as policies to which EUSDR should contribute. However, the Region is also considered as crucial in supporting not only internal but also external policies such as ENP (EUSDR, 2001:12-13). This paper is based on the idea that the EUSDR can be analyzed not only in relation to ENP but also with the Enlargement policy, although this last is not explicitly mentioned among other related policies in the official Strategy document.

The link between EUSDR, ENP and enlargement is the democratization process which has been taking place since the fall of the undemocratic regimes in 1989, a process which is still on the way to completion in some parts of the region. Indeed, no one could have imagined a strategy like EUSDR in the middle of the 1980s. Furthermore, because of the secessionist wars in ex-Yugoslavia, described by Tom Gallagher as the road “from tyranny to tragedy” (Gallagher, 2003), the 1990s were no better background for a collaborative like EUSDR to be possible. In the only paragraph referring to the historical background of the region, the Strategy recognizes that “the Danube Region

has been particularly affected by turbulent events, with many conflicts, movements of population and undemocratic regimes” and that “the fall of the Iron Curtain and EU enlargement provide an opportunity for a better future” (EUSDR, 2001:4).

In the existing literature on democratisation and EU enlargement, there is a wide agreement on the important role played by political conditionality and it seems that, even before being formalised in the beginning of the 1990s, the EU conditions related to the existence of a democratic regime and to the respect of human rights contributed to changes in the target countries (Lazea 2010b). However, this efficiency was not the same in all situations and there is strong evidence that the “effectiveness of political conditionality depends on a credible membership perspective for the target countries” (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2007: 23). The argument of this paper is that the EUSDR could play a role in reinforcing the credibility of the membership perspective of certain participating countries.

Figure 1: Countries participating in EUSDR: EU membership and enlargement

EU member states				Germany Austria Slovak Republic Czech Republic Hungary Slovenia Romania Bulgaria
EU non-member states	Enlargement Policy	Candidate countries	Negotiations officially concluded	Croatia
			Accession negotiations not started yet	Montenegro
		Potential candidates	Applied but not recognised as official candidate	Serbia
			Not applied yet for EU membership	Bosnia and Herzegovina
	European Neighbourhood Policy	Neighbouring countries	EP recommendation for considering Art. 49	Republic of Moldova
			Potential candidate status not recognized	Ukraine

The first part of the paper will make a short overview of the EUSDR by looking at its development, the participation of its member states and the interests at stake; it will end with a short overview of the Republic of Moldova’s attempt to pass from ENP to enlargement policy. The second part will focus on the case of Serbia as the best

example of how the EUSDR can help Enlargement policy by adding a new impetus to the credibility of the EU accession bid.

EUSDR – DEVELOPMENT, ACTORS, INTERESTS

The history of the EUSDR really began while the EU was in the process of developing another strategy, namely the Baltic Region Strategy, the first European attempt to address the situation of a macro-region. On December 14, 2007 the European Council invited the Commission to prepare a strategy for the Baltic Sea region; Point 59 of its European Council Conclusions states that such a strategy “should inter alia help to address the urgent environmental challenges related to the Baltic Sea” (Council of the European Union, 2008). Until 10 June 2009, the moment when the Commission presented the requested document to the Council, a number of EU member states had already advanced the idea that a similar strategy should be put in place for another European region: the Danube region. The initiators were Romania and Austria (Romanian website <http://www.mae.ro/en/node/2136>) but Baden-Württemberg and Serbia backed the initiative too during the events organized by Directorate General for Regional Policy and the representation of Baden-Württemberg in 2011 (http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/cooperation/danube/faq_en.htm).

It is far beyond the scope of this study to compare the two Strategies. However, it is worth recalling one of the main differences between the two. The Baltic Region Strategy involves only the EU countries, despite the fact that Russia also belongs to the region from a geographic point of view. By comparison, the Danube Region is more diverse by far, comprising EU countries, candidate or potential candidate countries as well as other neighbouring countries. It can be concluded that while Baltic Region Strategy is an *EU strategy for EU countries*, EUSDR is an *EU Strategy for both EU and non-EU countries*. Considering all this, the fact that EUSDR was set up in less than two years can be considered a success in itself. Indeed, the European Council adopted the EUSDR on 24 June 2011 during the Hungarian Presidency, six months after the publication by the European Commission of the Communication regarding the strategy and the Action Plan on 8 December 2010, after a year of intense preparation and consultations with stakeholders via five major conferences.

A short description of what the Strategy aims to address is necessary to frame the positions and interests of the states involved in the process and consequently to relate the strategy to the Enlargement policy. The strategy is a common response to

the challenges and opportunities displayed by the Danube region. Both challenges and opportunities oblige the countries in the region to cooperate, to plan and to invest together, because most of the areas concerned are not limited by national borders. It is obvious that the pollution of the Danube is an issue for everybody in the riparian countries, as is the fact that the extraordinary rich cultural heritage of the entire region requires an integrated infrastructure in order to be attractive on the international tourism market. As a result, the major issues were structured in Four Pillars, each comprising different fields of action called Priority Areas (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Enlargement, ENP, and EUSDR: conditionality, values, EU membership perspective

The four pillars	Priority Areas		Priority Area coordinators
A. Connecting the Danube Region	To improve mobility and multimodality	Inland waterway	Austria Romania
		Rail, road and air	Slovenia Serbia (Interest: Ukraine)
	To encourage more sustainable energy		Hungary Czech Republic
	To promote culture and tourism, people to people contacts		Bulgaria Romania
B. Protecting the Environment in the Danube Region	To restore and maintain the quality of waters		Hungary Slovakia
	To manage environmental risks		Hungary Romania
	To preserve biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils		Germany (Bavaria) Croatia
C. Building Prosperity in the Danube Region	To develop the Knowledge Society (research, education and ICT)		Slovakia Serbia
	To support the competitiveness of enterprises		Germany (Baden-Württemberg) Croatia
	To invest in people and skills		Austria Moldova
D. Strengthening the Danube Region	To step up institutional capacity and cooperation		Austria (Vienna) Slovenia
	To work together to promote security and tackle organised and serious crime		Germany (Federal Ministry of Interior, in cooperation with Bavaria) Bulgaria

Nevertheless, there are also differences between the countries in the region in terms of risks, opportunities, and interests. For instance, countries at the end of the river, like Romania and Bulgaria, are more exposed to an ecologic catastrophe

on the Danube than Germany although the risk potential in terms of Water Risk Classes is higher in the Danube catchment area in Germany than in Romania and Bulgaria (International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, 2001: 5). As a consequence, the distribution of the National Coordinators for the Priority Areas reflects both the interests and the concerns of the states. This is seen in Germany's role as coordinator for the Priority Area, "To work together to promote security and tackle organised and serious crime" because the importance attached to these issues by German representatives during the whole enlargement process with the former Communist countries is well known. It makes sense too that Germany works in tandem with Bulgaria to coordinate the areas, since the latter country is still under the scrutiny of the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification because of, *inter alia*, organised crime (CE, 2006). In the same way, Hungary had a clear interest in coordinating the Priority Area called "To restore and maintain the quality of waters" since it has experienced in the last decade the consequences of ecological accidents produced both outside and inside its borders: the cyanide spill near Baia Mare (Romania) in 2000 (United Nations Environment Program/OCHA Assessment Mission, 2000) and the Ajka toxic sludge spill in Hungary in 2010.

Beyond cooperation in practical issues it is also clear that the EUSDR could acquire more symbolic relevance for EU countries. This is the case in Austria, which has a strategic foreign policy for all SEE countries, just as it is the case in Romania, which is trying to achieve a more pro-active profile as a player in the Black Sea region.

As far as non-EU countries are concerned, the EUSDR represents more to them than the Four Pillars structure of the strategy and points to more strategic interests. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the pro-European coalition ruling the country expressed its wish to receive a clearer message from the EU concerning its European perspective. Although the framework of ENP was designed initially to avoid any discussion about future enlargement—the so-called "sharing everything but institutions" philosophy of Romano Prodi—the government of Moldova is hardly working to convince its European partners of the possibility of receiving it as a potential candidate country within or without the "Western Balkans package". After years of uncertainty, 2011 brought good news for Moldova. First of all, a final solution for Transnistria is on the way to being discussed again, with Germany inside EU ready to take the initiative of getting everybody around the negotiation table, despite the fact that some observers consider the new framework as rather favouring Russia's

interests (Jamestown Foundation, 2011). Even more importantly, on September 15, 2011 the European Parliament sent a very strong message by asking the Commission and the Council to acknowledge the wish of the Republic of Moldova to join the EU. The EP report may actually function as a “bridge” between ENP and Enlargement policy towards Moldova: while ENP is seen as the general framework in which the country could become “the success story of the EU policy towards its neighbours”, the EP recommendation is that EU engagement and ongoing negotiations with the Republic of Moldova should be based “on the assertion that the EU perspective, including Article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union, which should go hand in hand with the implementation of structural reforms, is both a valuable lever in the implementation of reforms and necessary catalyst for public support for these reforms” (European Parliament, 2011).

As for the EUSDR, the Moldavian government has been present throughout the consultation process and developed a rhetorical discourse in which the practical aims of the strategy are interconnected with EU aspirations of Moldova. Unlike the value oriented commitment of the Enlargement policy, the EUSDR contains no reference to common values (Figure 3). Nevertheless, the Moldavian Prime Minister has affirmed that “the objectives included in the Strategy will serve as a complementary instrument of Moldova’s rapprochement to the EU values” and that the participation in the Danube Strategy gives the Republic of Moldova “an additional opportunity to get closer to the European Union” (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2010).

SERBIA AND EUSDR: REINFORCING THE CREDIBILITY OF EU MEMBERSHIP PERSPECTIVE?

From a legal perspective, Serbia’s prospects for joining the EU are clear: it is part of the Western Balkan group of countries which were all potential candidates and therefore partners in the Enlargement policy. However, the Serbian government is eager to receive a more concrete perspective by the end of this year, meaning an official date for beginning accession negotiations, or at least official candidate status. Room of manoeuvre for the government is becoming increasingly smaller. The Serbian pro-European coalition is under severe pressure coming from the economic crisis, Kosovo’s unresolved status, unpopular economic reforms, and the upcoming elections in 2012. Besides all these, the multiple forms of conditionality coming from the EU (Figure 3)

have eroded not only the popular support of the coalition but also the pro-European orientation of the population.

Two very important events happened in the summer of 2011 which, by juxtaposition, led to the unhappy consequence of undermining the credibility of Serbia's EU membership perspective. The first event was the arrest and the extradition of former General Ratko Mladic in the last days of May 2011. Until that moment, the last big name on the Hague's list of fugitives was seen as the main impediment in the Serbia-EU negotiations. After the first wave of congratulations from the international community, the Serbian government have continued the difficult task of parallel talks and negotiations with Brussels, for what concerns the reform process monitored by the European Commission, in Brussels, with Kosovo delegation for all technical issues regarding the relations between Belgrade and Pristina. It is the claim made repeatedly by the Serbian negotiation team that the mandate for the Brussels-based negotiations with Kosovo is to improve the ordinary life of citizens living in the area and that they have no mandate to discuss issues related with Kosovo sovereignty (B92, 2011d).

The second event was the escalation of tensions in Kosovo which actually forced everybody to reorient the public agenda from the EU accession debate and the associated reforms to the issue of Kosovo's independence or, more exactly, to oppose the two issues of EU accession and of the recognition of Kosovo as independent. It was in the same period that a series of declarations from the EU and EU member states' officials shaped the public discourse in such a way that no one could avoid answering this question, "Is Serbia confronting with a new kind of conditionality after the Hague conditions being met?" In other words, is it true that, regardless the other kind of conditions, the final condition to enter the EU will be the recognition of Kosovo's independence as suggested by a group of German MPs (B92, 2011a)? Speaking in a softer and more diplomatic manner, the EU commissioner Stefan Fule was sufficiently ambiguous to leave space for any interpretation as he "did not wish to speculate that the issue of Serbia's recognition of Kosovo could not be put on the agenda several years from now" (B92, 2011b). That statement was enough for Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić to say that "he did not hear from EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule that a new condition for EU accession was to recognize Kosovo as independent" (B92, 2011b); for the opposition party and parts of the public opinion, it was even more evident that the government will have to decide, sooner or later, over the dilemma of Serbia's foreign policy: Kosovo or European Union.

It is not clear if such a radical dilemma is real or not, since there is no unity among EU member states about the way the Kosovo problem could be solved while all parts are using value-based arguments to back up their solutions (Lazea 2011a). What is clear, and more important for the current argument, is the radicalization of political discourse in Serbia along with the promise by the most important political leaders – both in power and in opposition—that they will never recognise Kosovo as an independent state even under the pressure of EU accession negotiations. What the pro-European leaders need now is a clear message that the EU is not imposing a new condition related to Kosovo that postdates all the other ones. Serbia and the other countries in former Yugoslavia have been subjected to multiple forms of conditionality (Figure 3) and, as some observers have noted, have functioned as “laboratories of transitional justice” where new instruments have been created: “the first regional system of special prosecutors and special courts for violations of international humanitarian law; the first invocation of ‘confronting the past’ principle as a principle of conditionality (Dragovic-Soso and Gordy, 2011: 193).

In this context, the EUSDR could bring some hope and action as a catalyst for EU integration forces. It is the first major policy which integrates Serbia, EU countries and EU institutions without any form of political conditionality (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Enlargement, ENP, and EUSDR: conditionality, values, EU membership perspective

	Political conditionality		Regional cooperation conditionality	EU membership perspective	Values (democracy, the rule of law, human rights etc)
	Democracy and human rights	Cooperation with ICTY			
Enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe (2004 and 2007)	Yes	–	No	Yes	Common values as members of EU
Enlargement to Western Balkans: Serbia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, but less credible because of the supposed “Kosovo” conditionality	Common values as members of EU
ENP	Weak	–	No	No	Common values promoted
EUSDR	No	No	No	No	No reference

The Serbian government took this opportunity seriously. The Serbian Non-Paper contribution to the Development of the Strategy is very clear in this regard: “Through its participation in the development process and subsequent implementation of the Strategy, the Republic of Serbia confirms its strategic commitment for its effective membership in the European Union” (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2010). In line with this commitment, Serbia is the only participating country which has chosen to place the National Contact point at the level of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration. Serbia’s Deputy PM Bozidar Delic himself proved to be very active in promoting the Strategy, assuming the position of coordinator of the country’s participation in the Strategy and confirming Serbia’s European commitment at the highest political level.

Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that Delic has called the adoption of the Strategy in June “a historic day” and “a crucial moment” for the region and. Moreover, he has mixed into the same discourse pragmatic issues about cooperation on the Danube, with the EU enlargement process (“The support Croatia received for its EU membership bid at the summit of EU presidents and prime ministers on Friday is extremely important and represents good news for Serbia, the countries along the Danube and the entire Europe”) and Serbia’s future role in coordinating a Priority Area (“Serbia is grateful to its European partners for allowing it to take part in the Danube strategy by coordinating infrastructure and road and railway transport with Slovenia, even though it is not yet a candidate for EU membership”) (B92, 2011c).

As a concluding remark, it can be said that this study joins the call for a change in the EU approach of the region in terms of incentives and rewards for the countries that have embarked on the road to EU integration, worrying about the fact that “current rather uncertain prospects of EU membership may not be sufficient as an anchor to the reform process” (Uvalic, 2011). Certainly, the EUSDR is not a decisive tool for reinforcing the credibility of the membership perspective of those countries wishing to join EU. However, taking into account the important role played by the credibility of EU perspective in keeping the pace of necessary reforms in transition countries in Western Balkans, any instrument that could reinforce this perspective is useful and important for counterbalancing anti-European forces.

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