

Joint Statement

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

online, 19 October 2022

We, the Ministers, responsible for the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (hereinafter referred to as "EUSDR"), met on 19 October 2022 on the occasion of the 11th Annual Forum of the EUSDR, jointly organised by Ukraine, Slovakia, the European Commission and the Danube Transnational Programme with the support of the Danube Strategy Point, agree on the following joint statement:

The end of 2021 was a milestone for the EUSDR. For the first time since it was adopted, the EUSDR countries welcomed the Presidency of a non-EU country, but has strong European integration intentions and a desire for joint development and prosperity of the Danube Region. This important moment was a confirmation of the equal cooperation of the participating countries, which goes beyond the EU borders.

However, at the beginning of 2022, the world was shaken by an unprecedented, illegal, unprovoked military invasion of the Russian Federation into the sovereign, peaceful Ukraine - the country that has been presiding over the EUSDR. The entire European community has witnessed shelling of cities, flows of refugees, attacks and atrocities occurring in one of the countries of the Danube Region.

We condemn in the strongest terms Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military invasion of Ukraine and its unprecedented war of aggression against Ukraine. We consider this deliberate attack on a sovereign, peaceful state as a violation of international law and the principles of the UN Charter, and as undermining of European and global security and stability. This aggression must stop, the Russian forces have to withdraw from the internationally recognised territory of Ukraine and all those responsible for war atrocities must be held accountable.

We are aware of our responsibility in countering the challenges in the Danube Region and the need for appropriate responses and mutual search for effective solutions through the use of our existing potential. Further, we encourage all EUSDR actors to fully capitalise on the Strategy's framework and established networks to support Ukraine and the neighbouring countries, both with regards to the current situation, but also in anticipation of future reconstruction. In this

context and after the key decision on granting the candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, we emphasise the EU prospect of the whole Danube Region.

We strongly advocate cooperation within the framework of the EUSDR to overcome existing and new challenges and threats in the Danube Region and emphasise the importance of sustainable regional development, creating synergies between macro-regional strategies and the Cohesion Policy of the EU.

Emphasising the issues of energy security, we support the further activation and work of the EUSDR in the direction of the implementation of the EU Energy Strategy and the principles of the European Green Deal. We will step up our efforts on reducing the dependence on Russian fossil fuels through diversification of energy supply sources and routes by accelerating the energy and green transition in the countries of the Danube Region in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement and the UN Climate Change Conference COP26.

We are aware that close international cooperation within the framework of the EUSDR, as well as the introduction of innovative technologies to combine effective mitigation of climate change with sustainability, circular economy, halting biodiversity loss, energy efficiency and providing secure and clean energy supply, will play an important role in this process.

We also reaffirm our support for the activities of regional stakeholders aimed at expanding market and research cooperation and implementing efficient, sustainable, flexible and integrated energy solutions. We will also jointly support the new and innovative approaches for optimised value chain development within the whole Danube Region.

While respecting the social dimension, we reaffirm the need for taking measures to reach sustainable economic development, create new jobs and invest in labour markets within the Danube Region, for instance in the field of culture, nature protection, sustainable tourism or people-to-people contacts.

We are deeply concerned about the devastating world-wide impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine also on food security. This once again demonstrated the deep interconnectedness of the world's trade routes, which had been severed and blocked. In these conditions, we recognise the growing role of sustainable modes of transport, offering different answers and resilience in challenging conditions like the intermodality of Danube ports infrastructure, which has become one of the possible ways out of the food crisis through the redirection of logistics routes.

Against this background, we recognise the important role that transport plays in economic, social and sustainable development in the Danube Region and we firmly believe that investment in the development and improvement of macro-regional transport infrastructure and navigation on the Danube is a common interest and priority for all EUSDR countries and regions. Therefore, we call upon all interested parties of the EUSDR to strengthen mutual infrastructural interconnections and develop new logistics routes to overcome existing threats and ensure sustainable and stable economic development of the Danube Region. The EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes as well as our efficient cooperation are an important tool in this regard.

We believe that, through intensive cooperation, exchange of experience and transfer of knowledge, macro-regional cooperation will contribute to a more coordinated and effective strategic approach to sustainable development of EU and non-EU countries.

We also recognise the role of the Danube Region Programme 2021-2027 as a useful institutional platform and framework for transnational cooperation for the territorial, economic, environmental and social cohesion of the countries of the Danube Region.

We emphasise that the European Cohesion Policy measures together with the enlargement policy and its Pre-Accession Assistance create through the implementation of joint transnational projects a new, unique historical situation for better integration and balanced development of the Danube Region.

We call for synergy in the implementation of joint initiatives developed both within the framework of the Danube Region Programme and within other similar programmes and related cooperation formats, such as the Three Seas Initiative and other regional initiatives, with the aim of encouraging dialogue between stakeholders on sustainable development, improving new transport and energy connections in the Danube Region.

We note the effectiveness of the process of taking into account the priorities of the EUSDR and an increasingly stable and ambitious financial support(embedding) via the Partnership Agreements, the national operational programmes funded by the EU, financial instruments for non-EU countries, as well as directly and indirectly managed EU funds and programmes (e.g. Horizon Europe, Life, etc.). The financial resources of the EU (and the co-financing of the regions) aimed at achieving the goals of the EUSDR are key factors in improving the coherence and well-being of the participating states of the Danube Region.

Therefore, we also believe that the implementation of the EUSDR should not be limited to EU-funded programmes, and should also take into account the

financial capabilities of other donors. Such a combination of financial resources will allow the implementation of large-scale projects that will have a transnational effect and will benefit the final beneficiaries in the Danube Region.

We recognise the role of the European Commission as a key strategic advisor, and the role of the Danube Strategy Point as a support structure for all EUSDR governance processes. We acknowledge the key role of National Coordinators in managing the EUSDR and continue to rely on their commitment to the development of the EUSDR. We also recognise the key role of Coordinators of EUSDR Priority Areas and Steering Groups in implementation and promotion of the EUSDR goals. We look forward to the continuation of this fruitful cooperation based on reliable and mutual communication between all interested parties.

We welcome the creation of the Danube Youth Council (DYC) and the institutionalisation of youth involvement in the EUSDR. We are convinced that the cooperation of young members of DYC with experienced officials and other stakeholders in the Danube Region will become the basis for deeper integration and allow for better policy coordination, bringing together key stakeholders at all levels of government for active participation and implementation of effective joint initiatives.

In addition to the mentioned initiatives, we agree to take into account and implement the EU Agenda on Green and Digital Transformation, promote post-COVID-19 economic recovery and strengthen overall resilience of the Danube Region, not least by pursuing EUSDR's common environmental priorities.

We, the EUSDR Ministers, appreciate the implemented initiatives and the work done, we also call for strengthening measures to restore cohesion for the well-being of the residents of the Danube Region and to reinforce its stability and security through reinforced macro-regional cooperation.