

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region: What Potential Contribution to Regional Stability and Co-operation?

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Abstract

The European Union Strategy for the Danube Region is a recent initiative that aims to enhance sub-regional co-operation through collaboration on a series of cross-border projects. In this paper, I present an analysis of the strategy's preparation and consultation stages in order to assess the extent to which it incorporates an effective external dimension, capable of enhancing regional stability and co-operation. In order to identify a set of common indicators that are indicative of successful sub-regional policy, I begin my research with an analysis of three existing sub-regional frameworks: the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, the Northern Dimension and the Black Sea Economic Co-operation. On the basis of this analysis, I identify indicators of successful sub-regional policy as: equal partnership, joint ownership, diverse stakeholder involvement, adequate funding and institutional capacity, strong level of commitment and common interests and objectives. When applied to the external dimension of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, the indicators reveal several weaknesses that may serve to reduce the strategy's overall effectiveness. By identifying areas for improvement, this research aims to make a contribution to progressive sub-regional policy, while providing a comprehensive case study that may be subject to analysis within a broader theoretical framework.

List of Abbreviations

BSEC	Baltic Sea Economic Co-operation
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
EU	European Union
EUSBR	European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region
EUSDR	European Union Strategy for the Danube Region
ICPDR	International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession
ND	Northern Dimension
NDEP	Northern Dimension Environmental Program
NGO	Non-governmental organization

I. Introduction

The Danube region is a vast European territory engulfing about one fifth of the European Union's (EU) area and population. Extending beyond the EU, a quarter of the region lies in the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova and incorporates a population of about 115 million. Including developed urban centres, rich agricultural territories and preserved natural habitats, the Danube is also home to some of Europe's least developed regions. Historically divided by political circumstance, EU and non-EU Danube states emerge from distinct political and socio-economic traditions that have affected their respective capacities to develop infrastructure, preserve the natural environment and implement progressive socio-economic policy.

To develop the under-utilized potential of the Danube region and alleviate its disparities, the European Union formally established the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) in December 2009.¹ Developed as the EU's second 'macro-regional' strategy, the EUSDR is a sub-regional project modelled on the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBR) that was established a year earlier to tackle cross-border issues in the Baltic Sea area.² Despite having been developed along the same methodology – central to which has been the banner of "no new funds, legislation or institutions"³ – the EUSDR is unique in its inclusion of a strong external dimension. Incorporating eight EU member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovak Republic and Slovenia) and six non-EU member states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Moldova, Montenegro, Ukraine and Serbia) the EUSDR represents an ambitious project aimed at enhancing cross-regional co-operation in a diverse ethnic region.

There is an implicit expectation that enhanced cross-border co-operation through the EUSDR will contribute to regional stability and integration by increasing networking and practical co-operation on issues confined to the low politics agenda.⁴ By creating ongoing dialogue and actively working on common

¹ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: European Union Strategy for Danube Region*, COM(2010) 715 final, Brussels, 8 December 2010, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴ Interview with official A, Directorate-General for Regional Policy, European Commission, Brussels, 22 February 2011.

problems at the practical level, sub-regional frameworks such as the EUSDR contribute to closer integration among participating states, allowing for the building of trust, alleviating existing tensions and creating a co-operative atmosphere that may be conducive to an easier resolution of outstanding disputes.⁵ The building of effective dialogue networks is particularly important for a region that includes South Eastern European states that have recently emerged from war and may be imperative to the continued stabilization of South Eastern Europe and its integration into the EU.

In this paper, I analyze the preparation and consultation phases of the EUSDR in order to assess the extent to which the EUSDR incorporates an effective external dimension, capable of enhancing regional stability and co-operation. In order to identify a comprehensive set of indicators that are indicative of successful sub-regional policy, I begin with an analysis of three sub-regional structures: the EUSBR, the Northern Dimension (ND) and the Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC). On the basis of my analysis, I apply these indicators to the external dimension of the Danube Strategy, arguing that the indicators will have a direct impact on the EUSDR's capacity to produce effective policy and contribute to regional stability and co-operation.

II. Three existing sub-regional frameworks

EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region

Launched in June 2009, the EUSBR represents the EU's first 'macro-regional' strategy and constitutes the structural basis upon which the EUSDR is modelled. The objective of the EUSBR is to enhance regional co-operation among eight Baltic Sea EU member states as well as with non-EU neighbouring states.⁶ External co-operation is perceived as particularly important with Russia – the ninth state to

⁵I. Bremmer & A. Bailes, "Sub-regionalism in the Newly Independent States", *International Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 1, 1998, p. 133; A. Bailes, "Subregional Organizations, Security and Integration in Europe: What are Subregional Organizations? What is Their Role in European Security, Democracy and Integration?", in V. Guðjónsdóttir (ed.), *Subregional Organizations in Europe –Cinderellas or Fairy Godmothers?*, Iceland, Institute of International Affairs and Centre for Small States Studies, 2008, pp. 7-10.

⁶ Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions concerning the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region*, COM (2009) 248 final, Brussels, 10 June 2009, p. 4.

border the region – but may also be extended to Norway, Iceland, Ukraine and Belarus.⁷

To ensure the support of EU member states that would not directly benefit from the strategy, the EUSBR was developed under the premise that no new EU funding, institutions or regulations would be created for its implementation. Although the absence of new funding has proven challenging to some sectors, over 80 flagship projects have been initiated to date, with 50 billion Euro in structural funds remaining unallocated.⁸

One of the primary advantages for the EUSBR is that it benefits from several already existing sub-regional frameworks that are well-established in the region.⁹ In practice, the Commission evaluates that not having a new institutional framework has proven to be an advantage primarily because the strategy has served to focus the work of diverse actors, so that the EUSBR is becoming a common reference point and projects of individual organizations are re-oriented towards the wider region.¹⁰

While the EUSBR is essentially an internal strategy, effective co-operation with the 'ninth' partner is deemed crucial to many policy areas.¹¹ One of the main criticisms gauged against the strategy is therefore its lack of competence in external policy.¹² To compensate for lack of independent external capacity, the EUSBR utilizes the ND, an existing sub-regional framework between the Northern European states and Russia, as its 'external pillar'.¹³ While most stakeholders welcome this arrangement, others are concerned that the ND is inappropriate given that it does not cover as many areas as does the EUSBR.¹⁴

⁷ C. Schymik & P. Krumrey, "EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region", *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, Working Paper, no. 8, 2009, p. 12.

⁸ Interview with official D, Programme Officer, European Transnational and Interregional Cooperation, Directorate-General for Regional Policy, European Commission, via phone, 12 April 2011.

⁹ R. Bengtsson, "An EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region: Good Intentions Meet Complex Challenges", *Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies*, no. 9, 2009, p.6.

¹⁰ Interview with official D, *op.cit.*

¹¹ Interview with official C, Programme Officer, European Transnational and Interregional Cooperation, Directorate-General for Regional Policy, European Commission, via phone, 18 March 2011.

¹² Bengtsson, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

¹³ Council of the European Union, *Brussels European Council 14 December 2007 Presidency Conclusions*, 16616/1/07 REV 1 CONCL 3, Brussels, 14 February 2008, p. 17.

¹⁴ Schymik & Krumrey, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

The EU is nevertheless optimistic about Russian co-operation, emphasizing the importance of ongoing dialogue and co-ordination at the practical level.¹⁵ Russia was consulted during the writing of the EUSBR and participated in numerous meetings, although consultation was kept at an informal level, with both Russia and the EU acknowledging that Russia was not an official partner in the strategy.¹⁶ Following implementation, the Commission has encouraged practitioners working on flagship projects to maintain direct contact with Russian counter-parts, while it maintains formal contact with the Russian Foreign Ministry and is actively working to produce a set of common points for co-operation.¹⁷ The EU has also tried to solidify Russian involvement with some material incentive, allocating 20 million in additional funding to frameworks associated with the external dimensions of the EUSBR.¹⁸

The European Commission is praised for the wide stakeholder consultation it held prior to the EUSBR's launch. Despite overall satisfaction with this process, a Commission expert identifies communication as one key challenge to inclusive and ongoing stakeholder involvement.¹⁹ While numerous stakeholders are included in the EUSBR, many others could benefit from the strategy but are unfamiliar with it or do not know how to use it.²⁰ The expert points to communication as a good example of a 'shared task', emphasizing the importance of national contact points and priority area co-ordinators in working alongside the Commission to improve communication among regional actors.²¹

Following a year and a half of implementation, the overall experience of the EUSBR is fairly positive; progress has been made in numerous sectors and co-operation is increasing. The Commission has identified key areas of concern, recognizing that continued funding, enhanced communication and stimulating a bottom-up approach will be important drivers to the EUSBR's success. Co-operation with external partners has also been identified as imperative to the strategy's success and has moved forward primarily as a result of collaboration at the working level. The EUSBR benefits from functioning within a stable region that is

¹⁵ Interview with official D, *op.cit.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Interview with official C, *op.cit.*

¹⁹ Interview with official D, *op.cit.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

characterized by a high degree of interdependence and pre-existing regional identity/cultural affinity.²²

The Northern Dimension

Established in 1999, the ND was designed to improve co-operation among the northern EU states, Russia, Norway and Iceland through co-operation in local and regional projects.²³ Like the EUSBR, the ND benefits from a number of existing sub-regional institutions that have a long history of co-operation. The primary critical discourse on the ND concerns Russia's 'equal status' within the framework. On the one hand, the ND has been praised as being genuinely inclusive of outsiders, on the other, it has been criticized for maintaining a divide between 'us' and 'them', with initiatives framed on the premise of bringing 'them' (Russia) up to 'our' (EU) standards.²⁴ Various actors were critical of the EU's 1999-2006 Action Plan for not taking Russia's views adequately into consideration, most notably, the Russian government.²⁵ The second Action Plan since 2007 applies a more flexible framework, under which Russia, Norway, Iceland and the EU are recognized as equal partners for the first time.²⁶

A major obstacle to effective Russian-EU co-operation is grounded in the persistence of traditional geo-political security considerations that prevent for true co-operation at the high politics level.²⁷ In practice, the ND has been successful in developing projects that "fly below the [high political] radar".²⁸ While this has inhibited co-operation on sensitive issues (i.e. energy) and prevented discussion of topics deemed important to EU member states (i.e. human rights), it has shielded the ND from deterioration in bilateral relations that result from intractable disputes.²⁹

Throughout its development, the ND has channelled resources into sectors that have produced tangible results and that were expected to be most promising for sustained co-operation. The ND Environmental Program (NDEP) serves as a good

²² Bengtsson, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

²³ C. Browning & P. Joenniemi, "The European Union's Two Dimensions: The Eastern and the Northern", *Security Dialogue*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2003, pp. 465-466.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

²⁵ Aalto, Bakkisrud & Smith, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷ K. Laitinen, "Geopolitics of the Northern Dimension: A Critical View on Security Borders", *Geopolitics*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2003, p. 35.

²⁸ Aalto, Bakkisrud & Smith, *op.cit.*, p. ii.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. ii-iii.

example.³⁰ As the first sector to obtain independent resources, NDEP funding increased from 100 billion Euro in 2003 to 243.4 billion Euro by 2007.³¹ While environmental co-operation has been hindered by increasing competition for resources³² and divergent value systems with respect to environmental preservation versus exploitation for profit³³, several well-focused short-term projects have resulted in tangible results and contributed to changes in cultural valuations of the environment.³⁴

In a survey of Russian and EU practitioners working on joint environmental projects, the following were cited as factors having contributed to policy success: common interests, shared objectives, independence/autonomy from authorities, trust, good personal relations and long association of partners, financial and intellectual equality, a learn-by-doing approach and expert-level interaction.³⁵ Conversely, factors identified as barriers to success included: lack of commitment, instability in funding and administration, financial imbalances among partners, conflicting interests and goals, prolonged project schedules and intricate negotiation processes, information problems, differences in cultural traits.³⁶ Trust was rated particularly important among Russian practitioners, as was the importance of financial balance in projects.³⁷ Overall, sustained progress in the NDEP is anticipated provided there is a clear sense of joint ownership that is supported by strong commitment and the ability to attract funding from international partners.³⁸ Greater stakeholder involvement, a focus on small-scale projects and enhanced co-operation in twinning and joint day-to-day work have been identified as drivers of success.³⁹

Similar progressive areas of ND co-operation are found in the health and fishing sectors, with factors cited for success largely reinforcing those noted by

³⁰ N. Tynkkynen, "Experiences of Environmental Cooperation Between the Nordic Countries and Russia: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward", in Aalto, Bakkisrud & Smith, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Laitinen, *op.cit.*

³³ Tynkkynen, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

environmental practitioners.⁴⁰ The environmental, health and fishing sectors are examples of uncontroversial areas with wide public support and common interest among all partners. As such, they represent 'safe bets' that are likely to produce success and formulate the basis for continued co-operation, perhaps eventually spilling from 'soft' to 'hard' security areas.⁴¹ While lack of co-ordinated projects and concrete results have been major sources of criticism,⁴² the ND has made encouraging progress in areas that have focused on producing tangible results that are of benefit to all partners. Although cross-border co-operation was initially hampered by significant cultural, linguistic, religious and economic divides,⁴³ ongoing networking has produced constructive dialogue that has served to unify interests and broker increased commitment from government and private funding institutions.

The Black Sea Economic Co-operation

Sub-regional co-operation in the Black Sea region dates to 1992, when 11 states (Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine) signed the Black Sea Economic Co-operation, with Serbia acceding in 2004.⁴⁴ The two primary objectives of the BSEC are to enhance confidence-building through improved dialogue on issues of common interest and to foster economic integration that would contribute to prosperity and produce functional links among the member states' economies and in their interaction with EU and global markets.⁴⁵ Nearly 20 years into the process, the results of the BSEC co-operation are marginal. To its credit, the BSEC is the most advanced regional co-operative organization in the Black Sea region.⁴⁶ Yet, on the whole, the BSEC has failed to put rhetoric into practice and has been criticized for lacking a

⁴⁰ See A. Hoel, "Best Practices in Fisheries Management: Experiences from Norwegian-Russian Cooperation", in Aalto, Blakkisrud & Smith, *op.cit.*, pp. 62-63.

⁴¹ S. Leland & A. Heol, "Learning by Doing: The Barents Cooperation and Development of Regional Collaboration in the North", in Aalto, Blakkisrud & Smith, *op.cit.*, p. 52.

⁴² Laitinen, *op.cit.*, p. 22

⁴³ Leland & Hoel, *op.cit.*, p. 38.

⁴⁴ S. Celac & P. Manoli, "Towards a New Model of Comprehensive Regionalism in the Black Sea Area", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2006, p. 193.

⁴⁵ R. Aliboni, "Globalization and the Wider Black Sea Area: Interaction with the European Union, Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 6, no.2, 2006, pp. 157-158.

⁴⁶ Celac & Manoli, *op.cit.*, 194.

clear sense of realistic projects, falling short of expectations,⁴⁷ possessing ineffective institutions and suffering from inadequate funding⁴⁸ and over-bureaucratization.⁴⁹

The failures of the BSEC can generally be attributed to diverse commitments and tense political relations among some of its member states, coupled with a lack of interest in inter-regional co-operation on the part of the EU and other external actors. The EU's lack of interest in developing a stronger relationship with the BSEC has been identified as a hindering factor in the BSEC's ability to evolve.⁵⁰ While sub-regional integration can serve to enhance a region's internal capacity, a strong external dimension is crucial when the sub-region (or some of its members) maintain important ties with external partners. The EU's continued bilateral hub-and-spokes relations with BSEC member states thus prevented the establishment of a common BSEC relationship vis-à-vis the EU and contributed to the fragmentation and weakening of the BSEC framework.⁵¹

Effective sub-regional co-operation in the Black Sea region is also made more difficult due to the region's cultural, historic and political heterogeneity.⁵² While sub-regional integration presents an opportunity to enhance regional identity in diverse areas, continued political deadlock has prevented the development of constructive dialogue that would enhance cultural ties or engage in identity-building processes.⁵³

Analyzing Results: Indicators for Successful Sub-regional Policy

An analysis of the EUSBR, ND and BSEC allows for the extraction of several generalizations. The first is the importance of a strong external dimension to the success of each of the sub-regional frameworks. Both the EUSBR and the ND are dependent on Russian co-operation for success in most policy areas. While the EUSBR does not incorporate Russia as a formal partner, the Commission has taken steps to ensure constructive co-operation. ND decision-making requires consensus

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-203.

⁴⁸ Y. Tsantoulis, "Geopolitics, (sub)regionalism, discourse and a troubled 'power triangle' in the Black Sea", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2009, p. 246.

⁴⁹ F. Tassinari, "A Synergy for Black Sea Regional Cooperation: Guidelines for an EU Initiative", *Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) Policy Briefs*, no. 104, 4 June 2006, p. 1.

⁵⁰ Aliboni, *op.cit.*, pp. 160-163.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵² P. Manoli, "Where is Black Sea Regionalism Heading?", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2010, p. 326.

⁵³ Tsantoulis, *op.cit.*, pp. 248-249.

among its partners and enforces legislation that formally recognizes non-EU countries as equal partners. Conversely, the BSEC has produced marginal results owing in part to its inability to establish a common relationship with external partners.

Related to incorporating a strong external dimension is the importance of developing a sense of joint ownership in which all parties feel they are engaged in an equal partnership. Ongoing dialogue and well-established working relations are key to building equality and developing common interests and objectives. Successful projects are those that benefit from strong governance structures and adequate resources. Finally, the participation of stakeholders is deemed vital to comprehensive policy in which experts, investors and regional and local government bodies share responsibility in making projects work.

On the basis of researching factors that have contributed to the success (and failure) of sub-regional organizations, I propose that key indicators of successful sub-regional policy include: joint ownership, equal partnership, inclusion of stakeholders, sufficient resources and institutional capacity, strong level of commitment, clear and common objectives. Drawing on the experiences of the EUSBR, ND and BSEC, I apply these indicators to the external dimension of the EUSDR as a means to assess whether the preparation and consultation phases of the strategy have been effective in setting up the EUSDR to perform as a well-functioning sub-regional framework, equipped to tackle common cross-border problems and contribute to regional stability and co-operation.

III. Applying the Indicators: The EU Strategy for the Danube Region

The EU developed the EUSDR in June 2009, tying the initiative to the attainment of EU sustainable development objectives.⁵⁴ In December 2010, the Commission issued the "Communication on the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region" which outlines the general framework through which the EU aims to achieve its objectives.⁵⁵ Supplementary to the Communication, the Commission

⁵⁴ Council of the European Union, *Brussels European Council 18/19 June 2009 – Presidency Conclusions*, 11225/2/09 REV 2 CONCL 2, Brussels, 10 July 2009.

⁵⁵ European Commission, *Communication: EU Strategy for the Danube Region, op.cit.*, pp. 3-13.

produced an Action Plan that lists detailed projects which serve as examples of actions that should be undertaken in order to meet the EUSDR's objectives.⁵⁶

The Action Plan identifies 11 priority areas that are divided into four core objectives: connecting the Danube region, protecting the environment in the Danube region, building prosperity in the Danube region and strengthening the Danube region.⁵⁷ The comprehensive scope of the strategy includes projects in transport, navigation, business, energy, environment, risk management, culture, tourism, research, education, administration and crime.⁵⁸ The actions and projects listed in the Action Plan were developed on the basis of an extensive consultation which incorporated local and regional government authorities, inter-governmental institutions, NGOs and other stakeholders of all 14 states participating in the strategy.⁵⁹

As in the EUSBR, the aim of the EUSDR is to achieve the objectives of the strategy with no new legislation, funding or institutional structures. Instead, the strategy aims to better utilize existing funds and institutions by organizing projects so that they meet wider regional objectives.⁶⁰ Funding for the EUSDR will be provided through national, regional and EU funds.⁶¹ Approximately 100 billion Euro is available to EU member states through structural funds.⁶² EU candidate and potential candidate states (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia) will receive funding from the Instrument for Pre Accession (IPA), while neighbouring states (Moldova and Ukraine) are eligible for funding under the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI).⁶³ The level of financial resources in IPA and ENPI are substantially lower than those available to EU member states.⁶⁴ It

⁵⁶ European Commission, *Commission Working Staff Document Action Plan – Accompanying Document to the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: European Union Strategy for the Danube Region*, SEC (2010) 1489 final, Brussels, 8 December 2010, pp. 1-89.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ European Commission, "Public Consultation on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region".

⁶⁰ European Commission, *Communication: EU Strategy for the Danube Region*, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

⁶¹ European Commission, "EU Strategy for the Danube Region – Financial Resources".

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Interview with official A, *op.cit.*

is anticipated that additional funding will be made available by private investors and international financial institutions.⁶⁵

Because no new institutions will be implemented for the EUSDR, participating countries must co-ordinate the strategy among themselves and the Commission through a system of 'priority area co-ordinators' and 'national contact points'.⁶⁶ Two countries have been allocated to each of the 11 priority areas as priority area co-ordinators.⁶⁷ It will be the co-ordinators' responsibility, in consultation with the Commission and relevant EU agencies and regional bodies, to plan projects, co-ordinate schedules and funding, provide technical advice and assistance and maintain a network of contacts between project promoters, stakeholders and regional and local authorities.⁶⁸ The co-ordinators are required to keep the Commission abreast of all developments and to communicate with the national contact points that have been established in each participating country.⁶⁹ Policy-level co-ordination remains the responsibility of the Commission, in consultation with a High-Level Group of all member states, to which non-EU states will be invited, where deemed appropriate.⁷⁰ While the structure of the EUSDR is modelled largely on the EUSBR, the needs of the Danube region are fairly distinct, owing to three principal differences: the incorporation of a strong external dimension through the inclusion of four candidate and potential candidate states and two ENP states, a high level of cultural and socio-economic heterogeneity within the region and a lack of pre-existing institutional structures.

Equal Partnership and Joint Ownership

To assess the sense of joint ownership and equal partnership among EUSDR partners, I conducted interviews with Commission regional experts and national representatives of all non-EU states participating in the strategy. Commission experts were asked about the perceived importance of including non-EU states and the perception of equality towards non-EU members by the Commission and EU member states. National representatives were asked about their sense of equal

⁶⁵ European Commission, *Action Plan, op.cit.*, p. 8.

⁶⁶ European Commission, *Communication: EU Strategy for the Danube Region, op.cit.*, pp. 5, 11-12.

⁶⁷ European Commission, "EU Strategy for the Danube Region – Priority Areas".

⁶⁸ European Commission, *Action Plan, op.cit.*, p. 11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

partnership and their level of satisfaction with inclusion in the EUSDR consultation and decision-making processes.

On the question of whether there is a sense of equal partnership within this strategy, there is consensus among the Commission and the non-EU states that the EUSDR is not an egalitarian framework.⁷¹ While non-EU states are invited to participate in the strategy and have a say in its direction, the central element of the EUSDR is that it is a policy developed and led by the EU.⁷² Unlike the ND, there is no explicit reference to an equal partnership nor is there a need for consensus for project implementation. Nevertheless, EU member states agree that it is important to include the non-EU members as much as possible at the working level, partly due to trans-border problems that cannot be resolved without the participation of key non-EU members and partly as a mechanism to speed the adoption of the *acquis* among candidate and potential candidate states.

One national representative emphasizes that an equal partnership is a “non-question” as long as there remains a strong imbalance of funding between EU and non-EU states.⁷³ Given that each EUSDR member is required to establish a national contact point, with between one and three individuals responsible for its implementation, the strategy requires a redistribution of internal capacity that costs money. The preparation of national positions has required an investment of time and learning, with resources having been shifted from other existing sectors. As implementation nears and co-ordination of priority areas intensifies, the investment of time and resources will need to be further increased if the EUSDR is to become an effective strategy. For small or young countries still in the process of developing administrative capacities that are largely oriented towards creating institutional frameworks equipped to deal with future EU accession, the investment is not necessarily an easy one to make.

⁷¹ Interview with Ambassador of a Mission to the European Union (non-EU state 1), via phone, 14 April 2011; Interview with a Foreign Ministry official (non-EU state 2), via phone, 6 April 2011; Interview with diplomat B from a Mission to the European Union (non-EU state 3), Brussels, 22 February 2011; Interview with diplomat C from a Mission to the European Union (non-EU state 4), Brussels, 25 March 2011; Interview with diplomat D from a Mission to the European Union (non-EU state 5), Brussels, 1 April 2011; Interview with diplomat E (non-EU state 6), Brussels, 1 April 2011; Interview with official A, *op.cit.*, Interview with official B, Directorate-General for Regional Policy, European Commission, via phone, 29 March 2011.

⁷² Interview with official B, *op.cit.*

⁷³ Interview with diplomat B, *op.cit.*

With respect to their level of satisfaction with the preparation process, representatives of non-EU states generally responded favourably, particularly with reference to initial preparation stages.⁷⁴ While the first preparation meeting for the EUSDR involved EU member states only, all subsequent meetings have included the non-EU states.⁷⁵ Numerous conferences and networking events were held parallel to the consultation and there is a general sense of the non-EU countries having been adequately included in preparatory discussions.⁷⁶

Related to the concept of an equal partnership is a sense of joint ownership. Partners that feel they have been included in a process as equals are likely to feel a sense of ownership within that process. A Commission official rates that the general feeling among EU member states is that the EUSDR is a policy “by the EU, for the EU”.⁷⁷ That decision-making capacity is retained within the EU institutions further indicates that the EUSDR is not a policy of joint ownership. Nevertheless, the structure of the EUSDR implies a degree of joint ownership in the sense that the authority to direct project development will remain with project co-ordinators and the actors funding the project.⁷⁸ An analysis of the ND had indicated that Russian practitioners felt a sense of joint ownership in specific project areas only when more egalitarian levels of funding were provided by the Russian government.⁷⁹ By funding and implementing projects, each EUSDR member should feel a sense of joint ownership at least within sectors in which they are actively involved.

Joint ownership is also somewhat reflected in the allocation of priority area co-ordinators. Although funding decisions will be taken in selection committees of the EU institutions, the decisions will largely be based on recommendations provided by priority area co-ordinators.⁸⁰ The EUSDR is divided into 11 priority areas, each of which are allocated to at least two EUSDR member states. The level of participation in priority area co-ordination among non-EU states is currently at five separate points out of a possible minimal twelve (considering that most EU member

⁷⁴ Interview with diplomat A from a Mission to the European Union (non-EU state 3), Brussels, 22 February 2011; Interviews with diplomats C, D, E, *op.cit.*; Interview with a Foreign Ministry official (non-EU state 2), via e-mail, 21 March 2011.

⁷⁵ Interview with official A, *op.cit.*

⁷⁶ Interviews with diplomats A, C, D, E, *op.cit.*; Interview with Foreign Ministry official, 21 March 2011, *op.cit.*

⁷⁷ Interview with official B, *op.cit.*

⁷⁸ Interview with official A, *op.cit.*

⁷⁹ Tynkkynen, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

⁸⁰ Interview with official A, *op.cit.*

states have been allocated at least two priority areas). States have volunteered to co-ordinate priority areas on the basis of administrative capacity and sectors' relevance to national strategies. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro have not volunteered as priority area co-ordinators, with one country accounting for its absence as a function of the lesser geographic importance of the Danube region and another admitting that there was not enough time to choose a priority area, due to having received late notification.⁸¹ The Ukraine has expressed an interest in joining co-ordination of the "rail, road and air mobility and intermodality" alongside Slovenia and Serbia in the future but has thus far been constrained by internal political restructuring.⁸² The remaining three non-EU states are included as priority area co-ordinators, although Moldova participates in only one area.

While there is not a sense of equal partnership within the strategy, non-EU states are generally satisfied that they have been well consulted in the preparation stages, with their proposals having been adequately reflected in the Action Plan. Given that final decisions on project implementation will be taken by EU or private funding institutions, non-EU states do not formally possess joint ownership of the EUSDR. On a pragmatic level, joint ownership is enforced to the extent that each EUSDR member is responsible for the implementation of their own proposal, with priority area co-ordinators largely responsible for the implementation of the sector as a whole. Given that priority area co-ordination is a function of interest and capacity, and project development is directly correlated with funding, the level of joint ownership among EUSDR member states and stakeholders will largely depend on their level of activity in the strategy – which may in turn be hindered (or facilitated) by institutional capacity.

Inclusion of Stakeholders

In preparation for developing the EUSDR Action Plan, the EU held a series of five conferences over a four-month period in cities of the Lower Danube. The aim of the conferences was to gather all relevant stakeholders and to discuss with them the broad topics covered by the EUSDR.⁸³ Concurrently, between February and April 2010, the Commission held a public consultation that invited stakeholders and the general public to submit written proposals that were subsequently published on

⁸¹ Interview with Ambassador, *op.cit.*, Interview with Foreign Ministry official, 6 April 2011, *op.cit.*

⁸² Interview with diplomat D, *op.cit.*

⁸³ European Commission, "Public Consultation on the EU Strategy for the Danube Region".

the internet pages of European Commission Regional Policy.⁸⁴ In total, the Commission received about 80 written contributions from 72 stakeholders.⁸⁵ A number of these submissions were incorporated into the Commission's first draft of the Action Plan and presented at the final conference in Constanta.⁸⁶

To gauge the level of satisfaction among participating stakeholders, I conducted a survey among contributors who submitted proposals during the Commission's online consultation. The primary purpose of the survey was to determine the level of satisfaction among stakeholders regarding their involvement in the consultation and their satisfaction with ongoing communication with the Commission and other stakeholders.

Although a significant number of stakeholders from all sectors were included in the consultation, a deeper examination reveals fundamental weaknesses and omissions that were prevalent throughout the process. The first concerns the capacity for participation in conferences by smaller and lesser known or less institutionally well-equipped NGOs. Although conferences were held in various cities to facilitate easier access for parties of different regions, participation remained confined to those with the capacity to finance travel and accommodation.⁸⁷ The narrow margin of time for preparation also constituted a structural disadvantage for smaller organizations that are often prevalent in the Southern Danube. Within a period of four months, stakeholders were required to prepare, co-ordinate and formulate positions on the strategy – a task that only more advanced NGOs were able to meet.⁸⁸ Even on the condition of meeting these challenges, invitation for active participation was limited to only a small number of speakers. Of a total of 185 speakers, only six represented NGOs, while the remainder were members of the Commission, European Parliament, regional or local governments, national parliaments, international organizations and government bodies.⁸⁹ A representative of a well-funded NGO recognizes this drawback, observing that

aside [from my own organization], only a handful of NGO representatives were invited to speak, some of these poorly selected (poorly prepared or with insufficient knowledge). There were certainly

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ European Commission, "Contributions to the Consultation".

⁸⁶ S. Lütgenau, "Civil Society Participation in the European Danube Strategy", p. 99.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

other NGO representatives that would have had something to say and were not heard. The conferences were dominated by official representatives/ officials, thus [the conference was] maybe more about drumming up political support than really consulting local stakeholders.⁹⁰

Among stakeholders surveyed, those involved in the socio-economic development of poorer regions voiced greatest dissatisfaction with the consultation.⁹¹ One stakeholder pointed to a lack of interest in gender issues and the inability to obtain funding for projects related to female trafficking along the Danube.⁹² Another regrettable omission was the Roma community,⁹³ which the EU has identified, in the context of the EUSDR, as “a marginalized community [...] that cannot be left behind”.⁹⁴ While it remains unclear whether lack of Roma representation is due to a lack of interest in the EUSDR, it may be concluded that it is attributable, at least in part, to the insufficient publicity that was afforded to the consultation.⁹⁵

A skewed level of stakeholder involvement is also evident from the written proposals that were submitted to the Commission and published on its website. Of the 72 stakeholders listed, only four are representatives of non-EU states.⁹⁶ A survey to gauge the level of stakeholder satisfaction is therefore missing an integral feedback component – that of external representation. Despite this omission, the surveys are reflective of the desire for under-represented sectors to have a greater voice. While the overall survey response rate was 34%, the break-down response rate was 30% and 31% for European institutions and EU member states, respectively, and 80% for non-EU states.⁹⁷

Stakeholders responded quite favourably with respect to their level of satisfaction in the consultation, with 54% of the respondents indicating satisfaction, 17% partial satisfaction and 29% dissatisfaction. Greater dissatisfaction was indicated by respondents who represented poorer socio-economic regions, from

⁹⁰ Survey conducted by the author, 24 February 2011.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Lütgenau, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

⁹⁴ European Union Regional Policy, “Cooperating for Sustainable Growth and Security”, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

⁹⁵ Lütgenau, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

⁹⁶ European Commission, “Contributions to the Consultation”.

⁹⁷ Survey, *op.cit.*

both EU and non-EU states. Of non-EU states, 50% indicated dissatisfaction.⁹⁸ Of respondents who were satisfied with their inclusion in the consultation, most cited the primary reason as being the inclusion of their organization's proposal in the Action Plan. A good opportunity for networking was frequently cited as a primary strength.

Reasons for dissatisfaction in the consultation included: proposal not finding a place in the Action Plan; civilian, educational and social interests having been marginalized; lack of integrated approach among different sectors; the first drafts of the Action Plan not having been available to the wider public; personal contacts necessary for opportunity to comment; an 'almost zero' influence in decision-making despite active engagement in the consultation.⁹⁹

Respondents were less satisfied with ongoing communication, with 39% indicating satisfaction, 17% partial satisfaction and 43% dissatisfaction.¹⁰⁰ Dissatisfaction among non-EU states rose to 75%.¹⁰¹ Stakeholders indicated that ongoing communication was very much based on personal contacts and of a complexity that was difficult for smaller organizations to follow.¹⁰² While a few stakeholders indicated that they were in contact with the Commission following the consultation, most noted that they had not received any feedback or were no longer in communication with project co-ordinators, members of the Commission or other stakeholders.¹⁰³

The results of the survey with respect to inclusion in the consultation and ongoing communication are thus somewhat mixed. Despite the negligible contribution of external stakeholders in the online consultation, a high response rate from stakeholders of non-EU states suggests a strong desire for involvement. Generally, there is a fair level of satisfaction with the consultation, but a negative trend is discernible from wealthier to poorer member states, with the greatest level of dissatisfaction voiced by non-EU states. Several respondents, including those who were satisfied with the inclusion of their own organization's proposals in the consultation and/or Action Plan, recognized the need for more egalitarian inclusion

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

of smaller organizations and civil society. Stakeholders were less satisfied with the level of ongoing communication, pointing to the need for contacts in order to comment on actions or retain communication with the Commission. In general, a strong desire was expressed for on-going communication that was better coordinated and more manageable and that included the opportunity for feedback for a greater number of stakeholders.

Sufficient Resources and Institutional Capacity

On analyzing the element of 'equal partnership/joint ownership', I pointed to the imbalance of funding for EU member states and third countries as aggravating the perception of an unequal partnership. It follows that insufficient funding is a problem in absolute terms for states that simply do not have the resources to implement projects that require a larger investment of funds.

The opportunity for non-EU states to obtain funding from IPA and ENPI programs is very small. This is primarily due to limited available funding, but also because much of the funding has already been allocated to projects that are important to the recipients, who are therefore opposed to a re-structuring of existing funds.¹⁰⁴ A Commission expert deduces that the only solution would be for the non-EU member states to fund themselves, which he concedes is unlikely.¹⁰⁵ While there is substantial interest from private funding institutions, countries with already high existing debts cannot borrow any more money. The expectation is thus that the non-EU states would invest in projects that do not require a large investment of capital.¹⁰⁶

But given that a major source of poverty in the region is lack of development due to poor infrastructure and connectivity, the key to development is widely held to be within relatively expensive projects related to infrastructure, navigability and energy connections. The Bosnia-Herzegovina paper, for example, points to the stagnation of navigation along the Sava River, noting a 20% decline in the use of water transport among Central and Eastern Europe, as contrasted with an over 10% rise in the EU.¹⁰⁷ The navigability potential for the Danube and its tributaries is large,

¹⁰⁴ Interview with official A, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁵ Interview with official B, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Non-Paper – EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Priorities and Contribution of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Danube Region*, p 7.

yet the required investment for port infrastructure and maintenance will necessitate funding that the countries either do not have or will have difficulty in obtaining from stakeholders that are reluctant to invest resources into countries¹⁰⁸ or projects they fear may fail.¹⁰⁹

Similar difficulties are evident with respect to institutional capacity. National representatives of non-EU states broadly agree that an effective institutional structure is integral to the success of the strategy.¹¹⁰ Many would like to see a focused, integrated and comprehensive approach towards the EUSDR at the national level.¹¹¹ There is optimism that this will develop through networking and 'learning processes' that result from ongoing interaction with experts from EU member states who may have more knowledge and expertise in given areas.¹¹² The process of on-going interaction with the EU has been praised as beneficial, inclusive and important.¹¹³ There are calls to expand this interaction to the expert and technical levels, particularly with exchange programs, like twinning.¹¹⁴

Regionally, the most active non-governmental actor in the Danube region is the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR). Most remaining NGOs are nationally, regionally and locally concentrated in individual states. Several national representatives have noted that local and regional stakeholders are actually quite numerous.¹¹⁵ Trans-border co-operative frameworks that existed before the Balkan conflicts are again beginning to emerge. The neighbouring states point to the existence of regional organizations that have valuable insights into regional issues pertinent to the EUSDR but that remain in poor contact with national administrations.¹¹⁶ One diplomat emphasizes that it would be important for the EUSDR campaign to be closer to these regions, given that "they are talking about the same things, they have the same knowledge. The problem is

¹⁰⁸ Interview with official B, *op.cit.*

¹⁰⁹ Interview with diplomat C, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁰ Interviews with diplomats B, C, D and E, *op.cit.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Interviews with diplomats B, D and E, *op.cit.*

¹¹³ Interviews with Ambassador, and diplomats A, C, D and E, *op.cit.*; Interview with Foreign Ministry official, 21 March 2011, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁴ Interviews with diplomats A, B and C and E, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Interviews with diplomats C and E, *op.cit.*

that the NGOs are still in a process of development and they lose competition with organizations that have better capacities."¹¹⁷

The framework of the EUSDR is formulated so that there is a national contact point for each member of the strategy. It is the responsibility of the national contact point to maintain ongoing communication with the European Commission as well as with stakeholders and regional and local authorities within the respective country. Yet, Dieringer, Laukó and Schneider observe that the "national co-ordinator has proved already to be in a gate-keeper position in some countries and established – by accident or by ambition – a kind of inter-governmental layer bottlenecking information flow and access."¹¹⁸ In many countries this may simply be due to a lack of administrative capacity.

The timeframe between the Commission's initial invitation to present national position papers and supplementary contributions was approximately six months.¹¹⁹ Participating countries were thus required to gather information and develop a working strategy within a very short period of time. For national governments possessing limited administrative capacities and poor existing communication channels with regional stakeholders, the process of producing a national position paper may simply have developed with an oversight to wider sub-national consultation. While the Commission's consultation constituted a formidable effort to reach interested parties at a horizontal level, many existing regional organizations in the non-EU states were not included on its mailing list, nor could they reasonably be without some intervention at the national levels. While several non-EU states emphasize the importance of incorporating strong communication with local and regional stakeholders, there is less recognition that this needs in part to be done through the national administrations themselves.

Information bottlenecks may also occur as a result of countries wishing to retain projects under national control. A stakeholder criticizes that "programs and funds are often targeted at national projects only (and not at the much needed cross-border projects) or the processes of funding cross-border projects from

¹¹⁷ Interview with diplomat C, *op.cit.*

¹¹⁸ J. Dieringer, P. Laukó & G. Schneider, "Towards a European Strategy for the Danube Area", p. 36.

¹¹⁹ Austrian Federal Ministry of European and International Affairs, *EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) – First Austrian Contribution to Stock Taking*, BMeiA-EU.3.18.13/0008-III.4/2009, p. 1; and Austrian Federal Ministry of European and International Affairs, *EU-Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) Austrian Thematic Contributions ("2nd non-paper")*, 30 April 2010, p. 1.

national funds are cumbersome or even incompatible between different countries".¹²⁰ While this may in part be attributed to the administrative bottlenecks outlined above, there is concern among stakeholders that the EUSDR is consciously being used to advance national projects or narrow business interests.¹²¹ Two stakeholder contributions mention corruption as a primary obstacle to the EUSDR's success, with one EU citizen stating that the "overall process for inclusion of projects is available again to a handful of people from the central government, which will lead to projects with a high degree of corruption."¹²² A means to increase transparency and reduce the possibility of corruption would be to include a wider number of local and regional actors by opening up channels of communication both vertically, from the national co-ordinator level, and horizontally, from the Commission.

The reality of the Danube region is that prosperity gaps have widened between regions in the Upper and Lower Danube, while development of central European regions has continuously improved.¹²³ The regions that are included in the strategy have substantially different capacities in terms of knowledge, innovation, research, development and institutions.¹²⁴ While this is evident among EU member states, inter-state and regional differences become even wider when including the non-EU states. The Serbian position paper, for example, points to a 9:1 wealth differential among most and least developed municipalities, with many of the poorest located in the Danube region.¹²⁵

The EUSDR could provide a mechanism through which disparities in wealth and administrative capacity may be addressed in the longer term. Unfortunately, under the existing EUSDR framework, it is the more advanced member states and their respective regions that are best equipped to capitalize on the resources available through the EUSDR – both in terms of institutional capacity and access to funding. The paradoxical outcome may be such that imbalanced support towards

¹²⁰ Survey, *op.cit.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Dieringer, Laukó & Gábor, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, *Participation of the Government of the Republic of Serbia in the Development of an Overall European Union Strategy for the Danube Region – Non Paper (2nd Contribution)*, p. 9.

more advanced regions may actually result in exacerbating regional disparities as opposed to alleviating them.¹²⁶

Common Interests/Objectives and Level of Commitment

To assess the level of common interests/objectives and political commitment, I begin with an analysis of the Action Plan, identifying projects that member states and stakeholders have thus far adopted a lead in. An analysis of the level of commitment based on the current status of the Action Plan may be premature given that the EUSDR is still waiting for endorsement from the European Council and the work of priority area co-ordinators in finding funding for many projects is yet to begin. It nevertheless provides an overview of members that have been most active to date. It also reveals a discrepancy between areas of interest and corresponding levels of commitment. “Improving mobility and navigability”, for example, is a key point of interest for all non-EU states,¹²⁷ yet none have taken a lead in any projects within this sector. It was Serbia that had proposed adding a security dimension to the strategy, but has not yet taken a lead in this area.¹²⁸ “To continue demining in the mine suspected areas of the Danube”¹²⁹ is a project directly concerning Croatia,¹³⁰ yet it has taken no lead on this issue. Numerous countries are interested in “promoting tourism, culture, people to people contact”,¹³¹ yet again, no leads have been taken. Most of the projects thus wait for leadership/funding from interested stakeholders or the EU.

Contrasting pragmatic commitment in taking a lead on projects, a strong level of rhetorical commitment to the EUSDR has been expressed by ministers and high-level politicians of all non-EU states.¹³² For non-EU states, the importance of the EUSDR is attributable, first, to the tangible benefits it is expected to deliver and, second, and perhaps more importantly, to its perceived linkage with EU

¹²⁶ See also: Dieringer, Laukó & Gábor, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

¹²⁷ See position papers of non-EU member states: European Commission, “EU Strategy for the Danube Region – Documents”.

¹²⁸ Dieringer, Laukó & Gabor, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

¹²⁹ European Commission, *Action Plan*, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

¹³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, *Non Paper – Croatia’s Priorities and Cooperation in the Danube Region*, p. 5.

¹³¹ See position papers: European Commission, “EU Strategy for the Danube Region – Documents”.

¹³² Interview with official A, *op.cit.*

accession.¹³³ Non-EU states generally believe that the adoption of EU standards and regulations, coupled with increased co-operation with the EU and advancement of regional development will bring the states closer to EU accession.¹³⁴ Within the EU, formal separation between the EUSDR and accession is deemed important, firstly, to alleviate pressure on non-EU member states from feeling that they need to perform well under the EUSDR framework in order to advance their accession and, secondly, to avoid non-EU member states from linking positive performance under the EUSDR with better accession prospects.¹³⁵ Informally, there is recognition among EU member states that the advancements made under the EUSDR may serve as a positive mechanism for non-EU states to adopt measures that would better prepare them for EU integration.¹³⁶

IV. Conclusions

In this paper, I have applied indicators of successful sub-regional policy to the preparation and consultation phases of the EUSDR for the purpose of assessing whether the strategy includes a strong external dimension that will contribute to the EUSBR's capacity to facilitate regional stability and co-operation. I began with an analysis of three existing sub-regional frameworks (the EUSBR, ND and BSEC), showing that a strong external dimension is an integral component of successful sub-regional policy. By examining each of these frameworks, I developed a set of indicators that are correlated with the level of success of sub-regional policy and applied the findings to the preparation and consultation phases of the EUSDR.

In developing the EUSDR as a generalizable case study, it is important to bear in mind that sub-regional frameworks are established with particular objectives and in the context of circumstances that may be unique to the region. It is therefore reasonable to expect some divergence with respect to the conditions that must be met in order for frameworks to function effectively, and it may be necessary to grant different weights to tested criteria, depending on geographic and relational contexts. Nevertheless, an analysis of existing sub-regional frameworks allows for the extraction of common indicators with regard to a general capacity for success. I identify these as joint ownership, equal partnership, stakeholder involvement,

¹³³ Interviews with Ambassador and diplomats C, D and E, *loc. cit.*; Interview with Foreign Ministry official, 6 April 2011, *op.cit.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Interview with official B, *op.cit.*

¹³⁶ Interview with official A, *op.cit.*

institutional and funding capacity, level of commitment, and common interests and objectives. To this should also be added isolation from high politics. This element has been important for the success of the EUSBR and the ND, which remain reasonably well isolated from intractable issues, while it has contributed to the failures of the BSEC, which has been constrained in its ability to transform rhetoric into practice owing to unresolved political disputes among its members. Like the EUSBR and the ND, it is reasonable to expect that the EUSDR should benefit from isolation of more intractable problems, due to its pragmatic focus on local and regional projects that are confined to the low politics agenda.

When applied to the external dimension of the EUSDR, the indicators reveal several fundamental weaknesses that may be expected to decrease the strategy's overall success. Non-EU states and Commission representatives agree that the EUSDR is not an equal partnership, nor do its decision-making procedures reflect joint ownership. Nevertheless, there is satisfaction that the EUSDR incorporates an inclusive framework that is based on networking, ongoing dialogue and the inclusion of all participating state proposals within the Action Plan. Non-EU states are satisfied with their level of involvement in the preparation stages of the strategy, while Commission representatives emphasise that the inclusion of non-EU countries is deemed important and should be equalized as much as possible at the working level.

The inclusion of stakeholders at the local and regional levels represents a more fundamental problem, given that participation was largely confined to larger organizations that are based in more advanced EU member states. While an overview of the consultation initially suggests wide stakeholder involvement, a deeper analysis reveals important omissions that have resulted in the marginalization of organizations from non-EU states and lesser attention paid to NGOs representing the needs of poorer socio-economic sectors and civil society. Ongoing communication with the Commission following the consultation has been rated as poor among several stakeholders and is premised on having contacts within the Commission. Representatives of non-EU states have pointed to the importance of maintaining strong contacts and including local and regional stakeholders within the EUSDR, but there is less recognition among non-EU states that this process must be facilitated not only by the Commission, but also by national contact points and priority area co-ordinators that will be working closer to the regions.

While non-EU states afford a high level of rhetorical commitment to the strategy, both in recognition of the practical benefits it could bring to their region and as a result of the desire to bring their countries closer to EU integration/accession, practical commitment to specific projects is hindered by limited institutional and funding capacities. The EUSDR depends on existing institutions to co-ordinate projects and disseminate information, while it relies on funding from national governments and local stakeholders, supplemented with resources from structural, IPA and ENPI funds. The paradoxical outcome of this framework may be that more advanced EU member regions will be better equipped to extract resources from the strategy while regions in greatest need of support will remain left behind. This imbalance is further reflected in an analysis of common interests/objectives. National position papers of non-EU states reflect the overall objectives of the strategy and all national governments have expressed a strong commitment to carrying out its mandate. Nevertheless, significant regional disparities imply that different regions have diverse and specific needs that will have to be addressed individually if the overall objective of the strategy is to be adequately addressed.

These conclusions are important in their potential to contribute to policy that may be applied to the EUSDR (and other sub-regional frameworks) in order to make the framework as effective as possible. The EUSDR is an important strategy both for the EU and its external partners. It addresses a diverse region that encompasses one fifth of the EU's territory and significant problems that can effectively be addressed only through trans-border co-operation. The strategy is particularly important to peripheral areas that have been marginalized; areas with relatively limited institutional capacity, deteriorating or limited infrastructure, poor social policy and outdated environmental practices. Yet many of these areas lie in non-EU states that are likely to receive the least support in the policy's implementation phases.

At the outset of this paper, I introduced linkages between comprehensive security and sub-regional organizations, pointing to ongoing networking and working level co-operation on 'low politics/soft security' issues as contributing to capacity-building and trust – factors that should facilitate stability and integration. The EUSDR can become an integral part of this process, provided it is implemented in a manner and with expectations that are realistic for non-EU states to achieve. Non-EU states praise the level of networking and two-way communication that the preparation process for the EUSDR has thus far produced. This practice can be

strengthened in the implementation phase through increased institutional and technical support that would provide marginalized regions with better tools to forge a destiny that is based on joint ownership and equal partnership. To capitalize on expertise, enhance transparency and build interest that may attract a higher level of investment, local and regional stakeholders must be included in this process as much as possible. A more integrated region with a lower level of disparity, higher socio-economic output and sustainable growth may reasonably be expected to become an area that is increasingly stable and better prepared for future EU integration.

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