

Youth, Europe, Danube
- Conference Opening -

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The opening ceremony of the conference „*The Young Generation of the Danube Area as the Key to the European Integration*” was held on 17 July 2011 in Andrásy University in Budapest, Hungary. The topic of the three days long meeting - organised and facilitated by the Young Citizens Danube Network (YCDN) – was the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR); a topic which was discussed by the Council at the end of June.

The Young Citizens Danube Network (YCDN) was formed in 2010 by a group of young people whose goal was to facilitate the strengthening of the European integration in regions alongside the Danube river. The organization aims to communicate, work for and act in the name of European values such as democracy, human rights and sustainable development. Moreover, YCDN believes that the future of the Danube region lies within the cooperation of neighboring states in the European Community. The organization’s motto, „*United in diversity. Along the Danube. In Europe.*” reflects the aforementioned goal. One way in which the organization realizes this goal is through establishment of international conferences. Such occasions allow for panel discussions, personal meetings and an exchange of ideas.¹

The intercultural conference, held between 17-19 June 2011 sought to abolish prejudices obstructing the process of integration. The themes of the meeting were established after the Danube Region Strategy.

The EUSDR was alongside the priorities of the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of Europe (January-June 2011).² The Strategy was discussed throughout the term of the Hungarian Presidency and was accepted by the Foreign Ministers on 13th of April and voted for by the Council on 24 June 2011. The Strategy includes 14 countries and 115 million European citizens. The present concept of the Strategy establishes 11 fields through which the strengthened cooperation between states should be accomplished. The 11 priorities of the EUSDR can be put into 4 main categories. Those categories are the four pillars of the EUSDR.

1. Connecting the Danube Region (e.g. improving mobility, promoting culture and tourism)
2. Protecting the environment in the Danube Region (e.g. restoring water quality, preserving biodiversity)
3. Building prosperity in the Danube Region (e.g. developing research, education and information technologies, competitiveness of enterprises and investing in people’s skills)
4. Strengthening the Danube Region (e.g. improving cooperation to tackle organised crime)³

Participants of the conference worked in four workshops through which all four pillars were addressed. The results of the workshops was presented for at the closing conference on 19 June 2011.

The Rector of the hosting university, ambassadors from multiple countries and leading member of nongovernmental organization were present at the opening ceremony.

Prof. András Masát, the Rector of the Andrásy University spoke about the interpenetration of cultures along the Danube, while highlighting the importance of tolerance for other cultures. In his words, the key to realizing such tolerance is through *mobility*.

Etelka Barsainé Pataki, Hungary’s government commissioner for the EU Danube Strategy stressed the importance of mobility as well. In addition she addressed business issues within the Strategy, in particular the *expansion of the job market* and the improvement of its *competitiveness*.

While the German Ambassador to Hungary, *H. E. Dorothee Janetzke-Wenzel* welcomed such initiatives as YCDN in order to utilize the possibilities of the cooperation and called for the dialogue with them, her colleague, *H. E. Michael Zimmermann*, Ambassador from Austria, appreciated the Hungarian Presidency’s efforts. In addition, he called attention to the importance of cultural and psychological differences also being addressed besides geographical distances.

Hans Kaiser, president of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation stated that the EU is „not ready” yet. The realization of neighbourliness is in the hands of the youth. Being critical at the same time committed and taking responsibility - that is the way how we all should behave according to Mr. Kaiser. If the man is working, he can always await success – he continued -, that is why through commitment and perseverance we will achieve our goals. Diversity and freedom are European characteristics which are for today’s youth natural, but we must remember the time when it was not. Mr. Kaiser emphasized the *obligation and responsibility* for this generation to take advantage of this opportunity.

¹ <http://www.youngdanubians.eu/wp/wp-content/uploads/YCDN-Hungarian-Short.pdf>

² <http://www.eu2011.hu/danube-region-strategy-drs>

³ <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/11/124&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

At the beginning of his speech the Former Hungarian foreign minister, *Prof. Péter Balázs* talked about a stakeholder conference. This meeting was organized before the Hungarian presidency as a final rehearsal where the tasks, alternatives and ideas were discussed about the EUSDR. In the close past was the next conference held where it was talked about the further future - about the Danube Strategy until 2050. The main question of the period is concerning the countries which will gain EU membership. The ex-Foreign Minister mentioned the West-Balkan states and our Eastern neighbours as potential partners. He underlined that *when we are talking about the Danube we are talking about our common future and future always means the young generation*. That is why this conference is about the reality and the actualities of today, as well as the YCDN.

Stefan August Lütgenau, from the Danube Strategy Civil Society Forum has also spoke highly of the initiation YCDN is taking. According to Mr. Lütgenau, this is big business, which is truly *independent and autonomous, democratic and a transparent bottom-up initiation*; a new beginning that aims to realize the cooperation with the Danube Area in general. This meeting is the successful result of twelve resourceful and committed young people but behind all the nice and creative ideas, *concrete support* is needed in the form of financial help. The financial commitment of the young members was also stressed by Professor Ellen Bos, the leader of the Danube Institute in Budapest. In addition, she mentioned the importance of the *committed institutions' friendly cooperation*, in the form of regular conferences, such as this one.

Johann-Jakub Wulf summarized the preceding ideas in his closing remarks. He started with a presentation of the YCDN, then began his dynamic speech. He reminded the audience to stay attentive of the continuously changing European environment. He continued on to mention the importance of sustaining and protecting the institution of the EU and the river. He asked the stakeholders and businessmen to *support education* in order to train well-educated *professionals*. Then he turned to the university leaders and encouraged them to continue *forming a community from the youth*, in order to empower them to achieve their goals together. The Budapest Declaration, which would contain the details of the Danube Network's activity and their future plans was mentioned in the speech.

All the speakers emphasized cooperation and our connection via the Danube, the importance of being committed to our common goals, while staying ardent and taking responsibility. For the realization of the innovative ideas born by the Danube cooperation, financial support is required. Such support can come from the already working networks between the institutions and by addressing new stakeholders about this issue. The primary instrument of understanding and utilizing multiculturalism is mobility – with the realization of the opportunities of Europe and the Danube's diversity, the Danube region can become the driving force in European integration.

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