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- EU DANUBE STRATEGY
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Europe of Regions

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HOW CAN CHALLENGES BE TRANSFORMED INTO OPPORTUNITIES — LOWER DANUBE EUROREGION CASE

Florentina-Natalia Budescu

Association of Cross-border Cooperation

“Lower Danube Euroregion”

In this article, the author analysed an algorithm of successful cooperation: 20-10 – the 20th Lower Danube Euroregion anniversary and 10th ACTEDJ anniversary. Twenty-one years passed since the Euroregion set up, which included eight members – public administrations from Braila, Galati, and Tulcea (Romania), Cahul and Cantemir (Moldova), Odessa and Reni (Ukraine), with a total geographical area of 53,460 km²; it benefited a community of four million inhabitants and implemented a project portfolio of over 500 million Euros in development funds. These projects have been dealing with issues of connectivity (rehabilitation of roads, airport infrastructure, etc.), tourism, health, cultural and economic development, and one common executive management structure was set up in 2009: the Association of Cross-border Cooperation “Lower Danube Euroregion” (ACTEDJ) with its headquarters in Galati, Romania.

Integration or Fragmentation?

Following the next natural step of strengthening the existing cooperation in what was called a “challenging area”, the Lower Danube Euroregion (EDJ) saga started on 03 July 1997 in Izmail, when the leadership of Romania, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine gathered to sign the *Declaration Concerning the Trilateral Collaboration*, based on the *Treaty Regarding the Relations of Good Neighbourhood and Collaboration between Romania and Ukraine and the Declaration Regarding the Promotion of the Cross-border Cooperation among the Local and Regional Authorities from Romania, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine*. On 14 August 1998, the *Agreement of the Euroregion Creation* was signed in Galati by seven

public administrations. From the Romanian side there were Galati, Braila, and Tulcea Counties, from Republic of Moldova – Cahul and Vulcanesti Districts, and from Ukraine – Odessa Region and Reni District. The Lower Danube Euroregion was set up. The work started, focusing on identifying common challenges and designing common solutions, building knowledge, and setting up a European road, as a sustainable solution for the future. A joint task force was established, gathering experts from all three states, with expertise in different fields and experience in interaction.

Cooperation started, common projects for development were implemented, but still, especially after 01 January 2007, when Romania became an EU member, and there has been a palpable need for something

more, a structure that would act as a catalyser of growth in the region, using the existent capabilities built since 1998.

EU membership provides broad opportunities. European funding, European shield, and also the European “status quo” are key elements. Is it possible to keep sustainable growth using just these opportunities? Among the members of the Lower Danube Euroregion, there was still a compulsory need in terms of understanding, legislation structure, ownership and responsibility assumed when using the European funding. At the end of the day, a constant effort was needed for building a “mind set” and a certain “way of doing business”.



The Lower Danube Euroregion, although a mix of opportunities, is a proof that neighbourhood can be transformed into an effective tool for reaching sustainable growth

EDJ aims at building sustainability, putting in the same “boiling pot” all that makes us different and all that makes us similar, the result being a specific “dish” that can be served and will serve everyone at the same time and also everyone individually. Therefore, EDJ represents a proof of how specificity can be integrated and not lost in a wider, common development strategy in a neighbourhood area.

What Is the Added Value of Euroregions?

The Lower Danube Euroregion, although a mix of opportunities, is a proof that neighbourhood can be transformed into an effective tool for reaching sustainable growth. After 21 years of cooperation, EDJ development is still a natural process that made it possible to establish the Association

of Cross-border Cooperation “Lower Danube Euroregion” (ACTEDJ), a nongovernmental organisation, with headquarters in Galati (Romania). Its members are those who founded EDJ in 1998.

Why set up ACTEDJ? A simple answer is that it was the right time to have a “common” management structure of EDJ, which would be able to not only consolidate the stakeholders in the region but also acknowledge itself as one of the stakeholders. One of the added values of the Euroregion will be creating a perfect setup for sustainable partnership to reach the next level, to empower stakeholders in accessing specific tools (funding, partnerships, etc.) that would build reliable bridges.

Another advantage was a “contamination” effect: development was a catchy “disease” and sustainable development was even more so. We are able to learn from the best practice, but we are certainly also able to learn from “bad practice”. Hence, the possibility of sharing knowledge, building partnerships is certainly an added value. “We are as strong as our neighbours”, although often found in public discourse, is not just a saying; it is the simple truth. Partnerships are often guided by just a need, but in the case of EDJ partnerships, although the need is the precondition, strategic development is also present, just because vicinity is a factor. Therefore, *strategic* and *sustainable* are the words that represent the precondition for EDJ partnership.

Should Regions Be Stronger or Should National Governments Control Them?

The EDJ case does not match any of these answers. Its structure is self-governed, and goals include the following:

- sustainable development of its members,
- integrated development cross-border cooperation,

- promotion of the private and public investments and provision of access to resources,
- continuous improvement of the transport and communication infrastructure,
- development, modernisation, and improvement of public services,
- development of cross-border tourism and the third sector,
- efficient and integrated administration of the existent potential of EDJ,
- development of strategies, programmes, and studies, including the thematic ones, with cross-border impact,
- favouring of the social, educational, and cultural integration actions for the inhabitants from the cross-border area, etc.

Management of EDJ is assumed by ACTEDJ. Romanian national law governs the NGO functionality. ACTEDJ was set up because EDJ was not able to entirely capitalise the opportunities provided by the European funding that appeared since 2007. There also was a need to have clear and specific liability rules that would be enforced in the case of attracting European funding. The goal of ACTEDJ is to support sustainable development of the public administration units that form the association, through widening the cooperation between its members and the development of advantageous relations within the context of the common interest domains.

EDJ and ACTEDJ are actors in the Black Sea region, which is often characterised as one of the most “volatile” but at the same time one of the most promising in terms of opportunities for growth. A new strategy for the Black Sea Region is currently being developed, shaping the context in which EDJ and ACTEDJ will grow. The question of how EDJ can become stronger, in our case, has an easy answer: ACTEDJ as designated executive management will have to become

stronger by using all the opportunities to create a “professional business card” that will combine the right words: professionalism, accountability, responsibility, community, green, etc.



EDJ projects started with cultural identification, followed up by environmental concerns and then economic development, as a natural line for sustainable growth

A community of over four million inhabitants, governed by three sets of national legislation and rules, following the European and other actors’ rules for funding, is compelled to find its own identity and act as one. Therefore, the term “control” is perceived mostly as structural self-control by establishing and enforcing a commonly agreed set of rules that will guarantee further development.

What Do Stronger Regions Mean?

The stronger EDJ becomes, the stronger its established values are. The feeling of belonging will also become stronger, creating common actions as a response to common challenges, enhancing common opportunities, and raising the sentiment of solidarity. Providing common solutions for sensitive issues, such as the rule of law, good governance, participation, human rights, environment, connectivity, safety, health, education, etc., will enable all stakeholders to be active and also to learn how to “actively hear” the other side, be it a representative of public or private sector.

Learning not only by doing but also by seeing and feeling has a great potential. EDJ projects started with cultural identification, followed up by environmental concerns and then economic development, as a natural line for sustainable growth. ACTEDJ projects were built on this foundation,

bringing together public and private sector, focused on the same goal: sustainable growth. ACTEDJ acted as a beehive of sustainable initiatives, therefore building trust between actors that are usually apart (especially public and private sector, both profit and non-profit).

Although ACTEDJ members are represented by public administration units from Romania, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine, one-third each, the decisions are made by consensus; therefore, EU membership is not a decisive factor for this cooperation. At the same time, the fact that some members are originated from the EU member states gives a “wild card” for accessing different opportunities. ACTEDJ members will have access to both EU and non-EU funding opportunities, both being integrated parts of the strategic development plan, with EU funding

being complementary to the national development opportunities and other actors’ development offers.

Florentina-Natalia Budescu is the Director of the Association for Cross-border Cooperation “Lower Danube Euroregion” since 2009. With experience of over 16 years in developing and implementing international-, EU-, and national-funded development projects, holding different positions of leadership in the national- and international-based NGOs (President of Federation of Romanian NGOs for Development [<http://www.fondromania.org/en>] and Vice-president of UPIR [<http://www.danube-ports.ro/>]), Mrs. Budescu holds a Master’s degree in Environmental Management and Monitoring and university degrees in both Public Administration and Law from the University “Dunarea de Jos” Galati.

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