

TERESA STUMMER

The Working Community of the Danube Regions: A Long History of Interregional Dialogue and Overcoming Dividing Lines with the Hope of a Peaceful Europe

With its 2,850 km, the river Danube runs from its origin in the Black Forest through ten different countries across Europe until it flows into the Black Sea. This makes it the most international river in the world: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine lie along its shores.

The Danube has always had many functions as a water supplier, transport route or border. In the time of the Habsburg Empire, the Danube served as a link between the different parts of the monarchy. Today, it connects the countries in Central and (South-) Eastern Europe, EU Member States, as well as candidate countries, which makes it a unifying bond for many people with diverse cultures and a common eventful history.

When the first steps were taken towards establishing a cooperation platform for the Danube Region, Europe was divided by the Iron Curtain and Lower Austria was situated on the edge of the West. Cooperation and exchange between East and West at that time was an extremely complicated undertaking that required a great deal of administrative work and diplomatic finesse. To target this problematic situation, in 1982 Lower Austria suggested establishing something called the “Danube Region” as a

political discussion forum. The idea was to build a framework in which – in addition to Lower Austria, Bavaria, Upper Austria and Vienna – the eastern regions of the Danube countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and even the Danube regions in the Soviet Union) could participate.

After many cross-border preparatory consultations and only three days before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Working Community of the Danube Regions (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Donauländer, *ARGE Donauländer*) was formally founded at a meeting of the regional heads of government of the founding members in the Wachau, Lower Austria on 6 November 1989. The founding members at that time were the Free State of Bavaria, Upper Austria, Lower Austria, Vienna, Burgenland, the seven Hungarian counties of Győr-Moson-Sopron, Komárom-Esztergom, Pest, Fejér, Bács-Kiskun, Tolna, Baranya, the Republic of Serbia, as well as the present Republic of Moldova. This makes this particular international cooperation more than thirty years old and therefore even older than Austria's membership in the European Union. The Working Community of the Danube Countries is also the oldest means of the Lower Austria region to pursue international cooperation at a regional level.

A central point was to make a contribution to preserving peace through regular contacts between the various stakeholders at the political, administrative and civil society levels in order to promote dialogue and mutual understanding. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Lower Austria moved from the border of the West to the heart of a reunited Europe. There was a precise mandate and clear desire to bridge the gaps between East and West and to work together on a common vision for Europe. As there had been very limited contact with the eastern neighbours for many years, it was very difficult to re-establish good relations. It is a process that does not happen overnight. The many years of separation had turned once neighbours into strangers. Many small steps were necessary to build trust and overcome prejudices. The Working Community provided the framework in which these steps could be taken. There were numerous meetings between officials of the regions to get to know each other and find common goals to work towards together. In spite of the additional obstacle of the language barrier, a good relationship based on trust and respect has been rebuilt over the years.

Today the Working Community comprises 43 regions from ten countries in the Danube basin. 41 of these regions are permanent members, two of them are so-called "observers" (regions interested in membership). It includes EU Member States as well as candidate countries and countries aspiring to join.

The preamble of the Working Communities statutes reads as follows:

"The Danube is not only one of the lifelines of the European continent, but also a unifying bond for many population groups representing a great diversity of cultures, organizational

structures and forms of societies. It is therefore only logical that these countries should be encouraged to intensify their efforts aimed at peaceful mutual relations and the pursuit of joint activities. In their daily lives, the inhabitants of the regions along the Danube are often confronted with problems that are similar or identical in nature. The members therefore declare their willingness to establish a Working Community and to cooperate within its framework." (ARGE Donauländer, 2020, p. 1).

In its approach, the Working Community puts its focus on what we have in common rather than what divides us. The guiding principles within the work was and still is the "promotion of cooperation between the members for development of the Danube area to serve the interests of its inhabitants and to foster peaceful cooperation in Europe" (ARGE Donauländer, 2020, p. 4). In fulfilling its tasks, the Working Community strives for the most flexible and unbureaucratic approach possible, which is why it manages with a minimum of institutionalisation.

The Working Community has a four-level structure: the political board, steering committee, secretariat and the working groups. The political board is the highest-level body of the Working Community. It is composed of the political representatives of the members (usually the heads of government of the regions or the respective members of government responsible for European affairs). They decide on the direction of the Working Community and give it its mandate. The chairmanship of the political board/ presidency of the Working Community rotates every two years.

The steering committee has the task of preparing the meetings and coordinating the content of the activities of the working groups. It is also responsible for the management of the secretariat. It is comprised by representatives of the acting presidency, the former presidency, the working groups and the secretariat. The steering committee is chaired by the general secretary and meets 2-3 times a year in the region holding the presidency or in Lower Austria.

To ensure continuity in the administration of the Working Community the secretariat was established at the Department for International and European Affairs of the Office of the Lower Austrian Federal Government. The specific tasks of the secretariat include among other things the administrative preparation of political board meetings and steering committee meetings, drafting of the minutes of these meetings and administrative coordination of the activities of the working groups.

The work takes place within the working groups. The political board has the right to set up working groups and task them to provide substantive input for long-term issues and projects. The working groups are composed of experts in their respective fields from the administration and also external partners if necessary. (ARGE Donauländer, 2020, pp. 4–7).

As mentioned before, the presidency of the Working Community rotates every two years within the member regions. For the years 2023-2024 the Hungarian county of Győr-Moson-Sopron is the president in the Working Community of the Danube Regions.

The region holding the presidency together with the general secretariat can select a thematic focus for their working period. The presidency is free to choose the topics/projects. Nevertheless, three main topics have emerged in the ARGE over time. The three topics are:

- Economy, Tourism and Transport
- Culture, Science and Education
- Sustainability, Energy and Environment

In each area, working groups connect the relevant actors in the Danube basin and identify and develop concrete projects. One example is the expert conference on soil, which takes place annually in Tulln. In 2023, the Conference of the Working Group Sustainability / Soil Protection of the Working Community of the Danube Regions will take place for the 30th time. Over the course of these years, an excellent network has been formed that offers the opportunity for exchange and the implementation of joint measures.

Much has changed since the Working Community of Danube Regions started its work in the region. Most member countries are now part of the European Union and other forms of interregional cooperation have been established. In 2011, the EU created its own macro-regional strategy for the Danube Region with the establishment of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). In light of all these developments, the Working Community of Danube Regions had to evolve and ask itself the question of what additional benefits it can bring to the table. What is the added value that can be given to the region? This challenge triggered a reflection process within the Working Community, the aim of which was to make the Working Community fit for the future. As a result, the process had identified some points as distinctive features of the Working Community. A key element is that its actors are the regions themselves, and not their respective nation states. Regions work for regions, so to speak. The structure of the Working Community has a bottom-up principle and there is no significant action by the federal government. This means that the work that is done for the people in the region comes from the regional level. Therefore, the target group and the people taking action are in close proximity.

Furthermore, the Working Community is, compared to the EUSDR, a much smaller, looser and solely political network. The Working Community has neither a concrete legal format nor a fixed financial budget. Regions in the Danube area that are involved or want to get involved in the Working Community of Danube Regions have no concrete obligations or membership fees. This has the advantage that it is very easy for regions to participate if they want to. However, it is necessary to be innovative in the implementation of, for example, the financing of projects, since there is no extra budget for this in the Working Community. The Working Community has a sound structure and common goals, but each member can determine their own level of involvement. The projects are designed to strengthen the regional level and further enhance cooperation along the Danube. The Working Community sees itself as an offer to the regions along the Danube to get involved.

Synergies with all stakeholders in the Danube Region

In the years since the ARGE was founded, many other actors have emerged in the region. It is a diverse landscape of actors that have formed in the most varied fields. For a cooperation platform like the Working Community, it is therefore important to include all relevant actors. Cooperation is important to use synergies and to be more effective in the work for the Danube Region. The Working Community has entered into partnerships with many key stakeholders:

- Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC)
- Danube Tourist Consulting (DTC)
- European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)
- European Region Danube-Vltava (EDM)
- Europa-Forum Wachau (EFW)
- Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM)
- Council of Danube Cities and Regions (CODCR)
- Assembly of European Regions (AER)

For example, the Working Community and the EUSDR have a lot in common when it comes to the geographic area and the topics they cover, so it made a lot of sense for the Working Community to get involved within the EUSDR. The Working Community is represented within the EUSDR (steering group member of the Priority Area 10 - institutional capacity and cooperation) and tries to bring a direct regional perspective to the table. It was important to recognise that the EUSDR and the Working Com-

munity are not in competition with each other. The great vision of the macro-regional EU strategies needs partners who fill it with life and work together to implement its goals. The Working Community therefore appreciates the good cooperation with the EUSDR, is committed to it, and supports it. It is important to work together for a common goal of strengthening cooperation in the Danube Region, making a contribution to European integration and discussing the current important topics in our common region.

However, regional cooperation projects such as the Working Community of the Danube Regions also face specific difficulties when it comes to cooperation. The Danube Region is not only culturally diverse but also from a legal point of view. The members of the ARGE are different entities ranging from autonomous provinces to federal states, counties or oblasts.

The more than 40 members have very different constitutional competences. Some regions like Lower Austria can fulfil many things in their regional competence due to the constitutional federal structure in Austria. In other countries, the regions can decide little by themselves and it is therefore necessary to involve the national level. This diverse structure makes it necessary to check whether a cooperation or project in a certain field is possible to realise. Cooperation in the field of culture is often a good starting point to implement a joint project, as most regions have some competence in this field. Cultural projects with an artistic focus are also a good way to overcome language barriers within the regions. It is a means to build relationships and friendships.

Moreover, in the field of interregional cooperation, it is important to bear in mind that the people (politicians and administrative staff) in the regions are constantly being replaced. With over 40 members, something changes every year. In order not to lose the overview, it is good to have partners in the regions who can support in obtaining information. The Austrian embassies in the countries along the Danube are an enormous source of support, just like the embassies of the Danube countries in Austria. Here, a good relationship is maintained between foreign ministries and the region.

With the current geopolitical development in the region, it is also important to ask which role actors like the Working Community of the Danube Regions can play and how they can contribute? After decades of supposed stability, the developments since the beginning of the war in Ukraine on the 24 February 2022 show how fragile the foundations of peace in Europe really are. For the countries of the Danube Region, this is not the first war since 1945, nor is it the first in Ukraine, where fighting has been going on since 2014. The difference is that the current war is one between nations that has not been seen on the continent in this form for decades.

The people of Europe are now faced with the question of how it could come to this and what contribution can be made to help bring about an urgent resolution of the conflict and a return to peace.

One of the Working Community's member regions, the Ukrainian Oblast of Odesa, is directly affected by the war. Many others are feeling the effects of the war through increased refugee movements, the energy crisis and the general state of the economy in Europe. Many of the members of the Working Community of the Danube Regions have shown their support with coordinated humanitarian, political, financial and material aid on a regional and national level. The Working Community of the Danube Regions is an institution that dedicates its work to creating and cultivating friendships beyond borders. This work is crucial to maintain a good basis for dialogue and contacts in the respective regions. Friendships built up in times of peace are now relevant and necessary to support talks and discussions to find solutions in times of crisis. The crises of recent years and the ever-widening divisions in society have contributed to a climate that is characterised by extremes. An understanding across borders and cultures can help prevent further escalation and prevent the conflict from spreading further to other parts of Europe.

At last year's European Forum Wachau (EFW), which was entitled "Safeguarding Europe's Future", the Working Community of the Danube Regions, in cooperation with the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM), participated by hosting the Danube Salon. The Danube Salon dealt with the question of what contribution the regions can make to safeguarding peace in Europe. High-ranking decision-makers and experts from the Danube Region discussed current issues of cooperation and security in times of war. As part of the EFW's citizen participation, those present were also able to contribute questions to the discussion on site and online. Moreover, at the Danube Salon in Krems on 23 June 2023, the topic of security in Europe was once again in focus. This time under the topic "A New Compass – Which Direction Will Europe's Security Take?"

The future of the Working Community must also be considered in light of the geopolitical situation. As regions of Ukraine and Moldova are part of the Working Community, this will also be an important challenge in the future. We all hope for an end to the war in Ukraine in the near future. After that, however, another major task lies ahead: reconstruction. The Working Community, together with the other actors in the Danube Region, will set up activities to support the war-affected regions in this effort.

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Abstracts

NADIJA AFANASIEVA, SOPHIA BEITER, MYKHAILO OMELCHENKO

Back to Spring: Towards a New European Security Architecture

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. What Putin's regime ignorantly believed to pull off as a 'small victorious war' turned out into the largest conflict Europe has seen since World War II in scale, intensity, number of casualties and destruction. In light of the planned counteroffensive of Ukraine, this paper aims to conceptualise a new post-war security architecture in the region. The authors identify economic and political tasks for Ukraine, the EU and the US to guarantee the long-term integrity of Ukraine and to contribute to regional and global stability. The basis for future scenarios is the analysis of the major policy shift regarding the West's attitude to dealing with the Russian aggression in Ukraine. An evolution from mere sanctioning policy against Russia to full-scale military support for Ukraine is observed and explained in-depth from hard and soft power approaches. Ukraine's military and leadership managed to reestablish a reliable and competent image of Ukraine through remarkable institutional resilience and victories on the battlefield. They also utilised a smart soft power strategy drawing on emotional and value attachments of Western elites and the public to sustain long-term support for Ukraine.

GERTRUD HAIDVOGL, JÜRIG BLOESCH, BERND CYFFKA, THOMAS HEIN, CRISTINA SANDU, KATRIN TEUBNER

Research Cooperation in the Danube River Basin: The International Association for Danube Research (IAD)

The International Association for Danube Research (IAD) was founded in 1956 to promote transboundary exchange in limnology and river management across the 'Iron Curtain'. This was a necessity to tackle environmental problems, focusing first on pollution. After the political and socio-economic changes in 1989/1990, the IAD concentrated gradually on hydromorphology. As a scientific association that has acted in the Danube Region for decades, IAD could provide scientific input to management authorities, policymakers, and administrations. IAD scientists have contributed to activities of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR)

and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), and they were involved in or led transnational projects funded by EU programmes.

Scientific progress in lake and river ecology has shaped the IAD's targets and scientific agenda. Keeping an ecological focus while admitting that ecosystems and humans are inextricably linked determines the future long-term goals of the IAD: conservation and rehabilitation of aquatic ecosystems; integral water protection, and sustainability; raising public awareness; and facilitating cooperation within the Danube River Basin, especially among young researchers.

ULRICH SCHNECKENER, SEBASTIAN SCHÄFFER

Russia's War and Europe's Changing Security Order: Time for a "Greater European Council"?

After the destruction of the European security architecture by the unprovoked and unjustified full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, a new format of cooperation in Europe is needed. While reflecting on different proposals made over the past year and the concept of a European Political Community (EPC) introduced by French President Emmanuel Macron, we explore the concept of a Greater European Council (GEC) as a new way forward. Especially with the historic decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, we believe that the institutions in Brussels need to change their policies and routine procedures. The EU's decision to pursue a Wider Europe approach with the EPC can only be seen as the first step in providing the necessary answers to the changing geopolitical and security environment. With this article, we want to contribute to the question of how to build and institutionalise stronger ties between EU and non-EU states and also shed light on the enlargement issue.

TERESA STUMMER

The Working Community of the Danube Regions: A Long History of Interregional Dialogue and Overcoming Dividing Lines with the Hope of a Peaceful Europe

The Working Community of the Danube Regions was founded over 30 years ago in Lower Austria. Since its foundation, the members of the working group have been pursuing a common vision for the Danube Region and the prosperity of its inhabitants. The following article will provide an overview of the development of the cooperation, from the first steps to the current problems the Working Community is working on.

It also focuses on the challenges that arise when working together in cooperation with many different stakeholders from a very diverse group. The aim is to build up interregional friendships on which to rely in times of crisis and to contribute to problem-solving as bridge builders.

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