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A Role Model for Water Governance in a Shared Basin: the Example of the Danube

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The International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) is the largest transnational river basin management body in Europe. Its work is based on the Danube River Protection Convention (DRPC), signed on June 29, 1994 in Sofia, Bulgaria, the major legal instrument for cooperation and transboundary water management in the Danube River Basin. The ICPDR was established in 1998. The Convention was signed by eleven countries: Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, and the European Union. Serbia joined the Convention in 2003, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2005. Montenegro became the 14th ICPDR member in 2008. The ICPDR is formally comprised by the Delegations of all Contracting Parties to the DRPC.

Ivan Zavadsky, Executive Secretary of the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, explains that: "One of the key challenges in managing an international transboundary river basin is to ensure sustainable development, water allocation, and utilization among sovereign states."

The ultimate goal of the ICPDR is to implement the Danube River Protection Convention, and make it a "living" instrument. The mission of the institution is to promote and coordinate sustainable and equitable water management, including conservation, and improvement and rational use of waters for the benefit of the Danube River Basin countries and their people. The ICPDR pursues its mission by making recommendations for the improvement of water quality, developing mechanisms for flood and accident control, agreeing on standards for emissions, and by assuring that these measures are reflected in the Contracting Parties' national legislation and are applied in their policies.

Another commitment appeared in 2000 when the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) was adopted with an aim to achieve good chemical and ecological status for all inland surface water and all groundwater in Europe. Although the ICPDR Contracting Parties comprise both EU Member States and Non-EU Member States, all agreed to implement the requirements of the EU Water Framework Directive. The ICPDR has also been committed to the implementation of the EU Floods Directive, which was introduced in 2007.

One of the key challenges in managing an international transboundary river basin is to ensure sustainable development, water allocation, and utilization among sovereign states. Historically, the Danube River Basin has been at the center of many significant political and historical developments. The earliest agreements of transnational cooperation were about inland navigation on and management of the Danube River. The outcome of the Second World War created a new political climate in Europe resulting in a new management approach. Even though the countries were divided between West and East, they recognized a common concern for the environmental quality of their shared waters.

Ultimately, the fall of the Iron Curtain transformed geopolitical conditions once again by creating new countries and changing borders throughout the Danube Region.

Geographically, the Danube River represents a natural regional connection from the Black Sea to the heart of Europe. Flowing through four capital cities: Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade, the Danube connects more than 80 million people. It is the key water resource, and forms the basis for human well-being and development in the entire basin region.

The use and the protection of the Danube River means balancing the needs of different actors requiring integrated management that goes beyond different interests, both environmental and political. Building and maintaining this balance was the main trigger for creating regional cooperation among Danube countries.

As a champion of transboundary water resources management, the ICPDR succeeded in bringing together countries that had been politically at odds for many years. Such an international organization has demonstrated that the interests of Danube riparian countries in water resources management and development are better met through cooperation than through conflict. Joint management of a shared basin tends to harvest positive long-term results, further reinforced by a solidarity principle at the core of the ICPDR's guiding principles.

In addition to cooperation, protection, and sustainable utilization of water resources, the ICPDR has been instrumental in EU accession for many countries of the Basin. Since 1991, the European Union has been one of the main initiators for river basin management in the Danube and the European Commission is one of the Contracting Parties to the DRPC. Also, Heads of Delegations of the ICPDR countries agreed that implementation of the Water Framework Directive (WFD) is one of the highest priorities. The ICPDR also promotes regional cooperation, which is an essential element of the stabilization and accession process to the EU. Thanks to the lessons learned through the work with the ICPDR, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary became members of the European Union in 2005, and in 2013, Croatia became the latest European country. Now Serbia and Montenegro are following the same pattern, and using the experience gained through their work within ICPD, and are on their way to becoming EU member states. ICPDR membership is highly significant for Danube countries and presents an opportunity for them to utilize knowledge from the work of its Expert and Task Groups – the backbone of ICPDR expertise and knowledge building – including representatives of all ICPDR members. They provide scientific and technical reports that represent the core work of the ICPDR, and other requirements specified under the DRPC.

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Regional cooperation, as demonstrated by the Danube countries over the last 26 years under the Danube River Protection Convention, is vital to avoid disputes and to move forward and establish common cooperation with the shared aim of keeping the Danube cleaner, healthier, and safer for future generations to enjoy.

Today the key decision-making at the ICPDR level takes place during ordinary meetings where political decisions are made and standing working group meetings provide political guidance. Expert and task groups are also a vital part of the ICPDR structure.

It is important to mention that the ICPDR supports the development of sub-basin programs and establishes cooperation on the international level. The ICPDR for instance has a strong partnership with the International Sava River Basin Commission (ISRBC) and the Black Sea Commission.

In order to increase the visibility of ICPDR activities, in 2018 social media platforms were launched with the aim of bringing the activities of the ICPDR to a broader audience.

Despite its achievements, the ICPDR still has much work to do in its role as "Keeper of the Danube."

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