



## Linking strategy and cooperation

*István Joó, Ministerial Commissioner for Water Diplomacy, Export and the Danube Region Strategy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, talks about how to achieve the key objectives of the JOINTISZA project*

**Q: What are the biggest challenges that Hungary and the region face in the Tisza River Basin, and how can the JOINTISZA project help to address these challenges?**

**István Joó:** Climate change is one of the most significant environmental challenges of our time. The increasing number of natural disasters is usually connected with this process, and these challenges need to be managed in a transboundary and integrated way. In some cases, changes in land use and river engineering have

reduced the length of the Tisza River, modified its natural structure and resulted in the loss of natural floodplains. Recognising the importance of joint cooperation and the crucial role of the basin-wide international expert network, Hungary—as a downstream country—supports the Tisza Basin Initiative and the Tisza Group operating under the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River [ICPDR].

These changes have led to an increase in extreme events, such as severe floods, periods of drought—particularly in Hungary and Serbia—as well as landslides and erosion in the uplands in Ukraine and Romania. Extreme events such as floods and droughts are likely to occur more frequently and with greater intensity. The impacts on low water flow may be particularly problematic—and, naturally, a healthy aquatic ecosystem is more resilient to climate change impacts.

There are also challenges related to water quality, as the Tisza River Basin is under the threat of pollution derived from urban settlements, wastewater treatment plants, and from industry and mining. The JOINTISZA project puts together the specific expertise related to both water quantity—i.e. floods and droughts—and water quality under the river basin approach.

***Q: How can JOINTISZA and other similar projects and programmes assist in the implementation of the Danube Regional Strategy?***

To increase growth and strengthen cooperation at the macro-regional level, the European Union established the Danube Region Strategy with 11 priority areas, including those focusing on water quality and environmental risks. Hungary, together with Slovakia and Romania, was assigned to coordinate the priority areas related to these important issues, and one of the main objectives of the JOINTISZA project is to integrate water quality and flood management on a sub-basin scale, which strongly relates to the cross-cutting approach outlined in the strategy.

As you may know, Hungary took over the Presidency of the Danube Region Strategy in November 2016 from Slovakia. A key objective of our presidency is to establish a closer cooperation between the strategy and neighbouring non-EU countries. The most efficient way of doing this, in our opinion, is by launching successful project concepts and working hard to ensure their implementation. That is the reason why the Presidency of the Danube Region Strategy values the JOINTISZA project so much. The consortium of the project gathers a wide range of expertise from a number of actors, and it includes two non-EU countries as well.

The project also foresees a successful collaboration between international institutions such as the ICPDR, the Carpathian Convention, the REC, the Global

Water Partnership Central and Eastern Europe, and the WWF. Therefore, this project implies more than simply harmonising the positions of countries. Although the Danube River Basin Management Plan has recently been updated, the proposed project will elaborate a more detailed river basin management plan for the Tisza River Basin, as a sub-basin of the Danube using higher resolution techniques. In addition, it will also discuss specific topics relevant to the basin. The Tisza Basin cooperation can serve as an example for other sub-basins all over Europe and beyond.

***Q: How can we ensure that the successful collaborative effort of JOINTISZA will be built on in the future?***

There is a long history of cooperation in the Tisza River Basin, and the countries of the basin have made significant achievements in the last decade. The JOINTISZA project concept is built on these joint successes and aims to further improve transboundary cooperation at the sub-basin level to support sustainable development of the region.

The Tisza River sub-basin faces special challenges, thus strong cooperation is needed between the countries that share the river basin. The EUSDR is represented in the project consortium by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, which plays a Danube basin-level coordinative role, both in the “water quality” and the “environmental risks” priority areas.

The durability of the project results is guaranteed by three aspects. First, the country-level engagement in the implementation of the EUSDR obliges us to regularly update the Integrated Tisza River Basin Management Plan; this is one of the key objectives of the JOINTISZA project. Second, the EU Water Framework Directive requires the mandatory revision of the achieved water status in six-year cycles. Third, the ICPDR Tisza Group can serve as a platform for continuing Tisza basin-related cooperation and work in the future. The Tisza Office, established in 2014, plays an important role in the management actions of the JOINTISZA project and will also ensure the long-term impact of the project.

It also needs to be mentioned that this project has managed to bring convincing arguments to the donor Danube Transnational Programme for financing sub-basin level activities. This was initially a challenge, as these types of projects usually allow only a limited number of partners to participate.

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