

Chapter 1

Title

**Current Challenges and Potentials
for Regional Cooperation in the Danube Region**

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The Danube River Basin is an area with long history of bilateral as much as multilateral contacts and cooperation efforts. It has had, as many others, its ups and downs, sometimes dividing the political entities situated along its course, but most of the times connecting the peoples living near its banks and tributaries.

The Danube Region – 14 countries involved Throughout history the benefits that this biggest artery of Europe has offered with its waters have been equally numerous as they are today. Yet, these benefits have rarely been taken advantage of in a most efficient way. Joint efforts for effective solutions to the common and sustainable utilisation of the many opportunities that this basin carries through our countries have been rarely successful, and, very often, blocked by national interests and historically driven disagreements.

In view of the ongoing global financial crisis, the Danube River Basin can represent a valuable source for sustained economic development. The potential of the Danube and its tributaries as a transport route and as a potential renewable energy production source has been quite underused

¹ The present paper is the improved and modified version of the study 'Regional Cooperation as a Precondition for Ecologic Sustainability' in the volume 'Resources of Danubian Region: The Possibility of Cooperation and Utilization' published by the Humbolt-Club Serbia in 2013.

in the last decades. Although, transport along the river has increased and pre-1990 figures have slowly been restored, the economic potential of the Danube is still quite low and there are still many issues that need to be solved before we are witnesses of the positive economic contributions of an effective use of the resources offered by this river basin.

Now, followers of the environmentally friendly approaches would disagree that an increased use of the Danube and its tributaries for economic purposes would be a desirable development of this region. Nevertheless, the Danube is a public good, access to which should be ensured for all potential users and for all types of activities. One cannot ban access to the river for certain types of users, yet what is important is that an agreement on the most sustainable use of the resources of the Danube River Basin is reached by all types of users and at all the major decision-making and cooperation levels.

The combination of environmental protection and increased economic potential can be a win-win situation, only if substantial and coordinated dialogue is established by all the involved parties, through which the concerns and the issues raised by other users are voiced, understood and accommodated to the benefit of all. That this is not completely impossible has been shown by several projects of cross-disciplinary cooperation, with which solutions for maintaining or improving good ecological status, but at the same time removing navigation and transport obstacles have been mutually agreed upon and successfully implemented.

This, of course, can be achieved not only with the adoption of a different perspective by the different stakeholders, but also with a more receptive attitude to change by the governments of the Danube countries concerning inherited open issues and their overcoming. The open issues and the necessary steps to be undertaken have so far become familiar to all those who have been involved in Danube Cooperation

in the last decade. Unfortunately, some of them have been solved and some of them it is being worked on, yet many of them remain to cause disagreement as relics of a different era.

In times when international economic exchange is becoming much more an issue of transnational nature and when climate change is a reality that threatens the earth rather than this or that country, change is imminent. In such a context we need to understand that many problems that national governments face are not only their own, and that many problems are transnational impacts. A successful and sustainable approach to future challenges then will have to opt for better change management, integrated policy-making and priority-setting, and joint implementation efforts for better and sustainable development.

It is important to understand that increasing inland waterways transport does not have to mean destroying the environment; that improving inland waterways transport and navigation infrastructure is not always related to decreasing environmental benefits; and that some policies are more important than others. If we take a broader look at the effects of uncoordinated policies, we shall understand that inland waterways transport is much more environmentally friendly than road or rail transport, and that at the same time it will contribute to the decongestion of roads and will make place for passenger transport. We will also understand that industries not conforming to the environmental requirements of wastewater management should be denied the right to perform, rather than pay for polluting the rivers, the cleaning of which will later on cost much more than the price paid for the permission to pollute. We shall also understand that diffuse pollution by agriculture is much more problematic and more difficult to control; nevertheless, it is hardly subdued to respect environmental standards when subsidised.

Until to this point, I was mainly focusing on technical and economic questions. It has to be understood, there are also other fields, where it is necessary to do more than this. For example, it is science and education, because, for example, one of the deficits of the Stability Pact is the fact that science and education is not the focus point and the responsibility of the European Union. By the rules within the EU, it is up to the Nation State to develop here a lot. This is a pity, especially for the region along the river Danube, but also to Eastern and South Eastern Europe. An improvement can only be done if there is more human and financial investment in the education and the development of systems, which are compatible with the other parts of Europe. There are many efforts in this direction, but the job is not yet done. Especially, we need more exchange programs to create possibilities for the gifted people to study outside the EU.

Programs like Erasmus Mundus and so on were focusing on this, but it is not enough for the current situation....

Energy is also a special chapter, which is underlined by the development in the east as well, especially by Russia. Russians are trying to go around Ukraine so that they are not depending on the current political situation. So far, several proposals are coming up like pipeline from the Caucasus and Turkey, from Southeast Europe to the Danube Region, but now, by the development in Turkey, it is not so actual anymore. So far, we are looking for a pipeline going to the Black Sea touching also the Danube Area. We have many politically connected discussions, because Russians are trying to gain more influence in the area by such pipelines. An example is the fact that they have the energy company of Serbia, NIS, to influence the situation there. They bought it quite cheap, but for the moment this strategy is not really working. There has been an energy stability pact in Southeast Europe for the last ten years, which created a kind of improvement, but more can be done

To change the subject, we also have to look to religions. Europe has an interesting mixture of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam, and so on. For a longer time, I think, they were all living together without any conflicts, but then the instrumentalization by politics and competition created many conflicts. This is one of the necessary challenges, especially to create the European Islam, which might come also by the migration coming from the Near and the Middle East. Not too much is done on the subject, but there is a greater concern, so I have the hope that something will develop in the right direction.

Last but not least, we have a look at the conflicts in the region, existing by history. If I follow the river, there are, for example, Hungarian minorities in Slovakia and Romania, which have been creating some concern sometimes also politically used by Hungary. However, it should be possible to develop cohabitation along the river Danube. Other conflicts are some discussions concerning borders, which are also used for politics. In the time of the Habsburgs and the Ottoman Empire in Yugoslavia, there were no borders, so far it was not really a problem, but now everybody is trying to instrumentalize such conflicts or discussions, organizing elections to gain more influence or to block the other. The question of neighbourhood has a great importance. So we elaborate a lot on this subject, for example, by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE) to get a better feeling for neighbourhood. We are looking to the history books and teaching a mutual understanding of history in the different countries, and we have created a presentation so-called "Vicinity", which is running on the TV channels of the region.

In this context, we have also some difficulties by frozen conflicts. The most outstanding example is Transnistria concerning Moldova. We have to focus on the fact that

Moldova has only 400 meters of the river Danube, but this is extremely important as a connection to the Black Sea and the Atlantic. Besides, the wounds from the Balkan Wars are not healed. The example here is Eastern Slavonia (Vukovar), where it is still possible to see what is happening because of the ongoing conflicts. Some examples of minor importance can also be added, but here we have to create capacity to gather these functions of the river Danube. At the end I may repeat, that such a river like the Danube has the possibility to divide human beings or to connect them. What we are trying to improve is the connection and ability to live together, because around the river Danube there is both a common romanticism and an interconnected culture, which might help to overcome all the difficulties.

Economic development is the motor of our well-being, but it is not supposed to be the source of our peril. Broader perspective on how we manage the various sectors of our activities on the national level, as well as on the transnational level, needs to be adopted if we are to overcome the challenges lying ahead of us. The biggest challenge is still going to be faced by national policy makers. They will be the ones who will have to agree on how to deal with the imminent changes of our societies and who will have to come up with a sustainable, and most of all doable, plan for getting the most of the available resources, without jeopardising their future potential.

For the Danube Region this has been an ongoing challenge. Forums for political dialogue have been established, but practical implementation is far from any tangible results. Many infrastructure projects are on hold or have been postponed for decades and on many occasions such projects are still very low on the political agenda in many Danube countries. With a missing infrastructure, economic activities are difficult to be sustained. Several entrepreneurs are discouraged by the difficult navigation conditions on many parts

of the river, by other physical obstacles and certain types of economic activities such as tourism or cultural and sub-regional cooperation. The fragmented efforts of the Danube initiatives and organisations are lost in the sea of varying administrative rules and requirements, while financing problems are seldom coordinated from an interdisciplinary perspective, quite often working against each other.

Yet, hope in a sustainable perspective for the Danube is not lost. The Danube countries, on the initiative of Austria and Romania, have expressed their willingness to join efforts and overcome national differences for a sustainable development of the Danube Region as a whole, and its faster and better integration in the European cooperation space. The European Commission thereof mandated to assist the countries from the Danube Region with a proposal of a comprehensive development strategy for the region, and thus provided a comprehensive framework for the integration of the fragmented sectoral activities, creating a meaningful and targeted effort towards Danube-wide economic and political development to the benefit of all its members.

It is our hope that the Danube countries shall seize this unique opportunity providing cooperation processes with a new impetus and vigour and with more tangible development initiatives in the near future.

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is a macro-regional strategy adopted by the European Commission in December 2010 and endorsed by the European Council in 2011.

The strategy was jointly developed by the Commission, the Danube Region countries and stakeholders, in order to address common challenges together. The strategy seeks to create synergies and coordination between existing policies and initiatives taking place across the Danube Region.

This strategy is not about funding but about closer cooperation Regional cooperation is a precondition for a lot of things, especially for ecological matters. Concerning the river Danube, we have to state clearly that if you do not prepare the ecological conditions at the beginning of a river, you will end up in trouble. Ecological sustainability was not the only reason to start this regional cooperation, in the background there was also a political one. Ecological cooperation started because organisations in this field have already existed for a longer time.

One of the main issues but also one of the difficulties is to create this regional cooperation over borders. The EUSDR started with three no's: no money, no new institutions, no new rules. This was a shock in the beginning, but on the other side, I think, it was a very good decision because we have to use what is existing already and bring the countries along the river Danube together.

The Danube Region Strategy addresses a wide range of issues; these are divided among ⁴ pillars and ¹¹ priority areas. Each priority area is managed by two Priority Area Coordinators (PACs).

PA 1A | Mobility | Waterways

Priority Area 1A "To improve mobility and intermodality of inland waterways" is coordinated by Austria and Romania.

PA 1B | Mobility | Rail-Road-Air

Priority Area 1B "To improve mobility and intermodality - rail, road and air" is coordinated by Slovenia and Serbia.

PA 02 | Energy

Priority Area 2 "To encourage more sustainable energy" is coordinated by Hungary and the Czech Republic.

PA 03 | Culture & Tourism

Priority Area 3 "To promote culture and tourism, people to people contacts" is coordinated by Bulgaria and Romania.

PA 04 | Water Quality

Priority Area 4 of the EUSDR “To restore and maintain the quality of waters” is coordinated by Hungary and Slovakia.

PA 05 | Environmental Risks

Priority Area 5 of the EUSDR “To manage environmental risks” is coordinated by Hungary and Romania.

PA 06 | Biodiversity, landscapes, quality of air and soils

Priority Area 6 “To preserve biodiversity, landscapes and the quality of air and soils” is coordinated by the Land Bavaria (Germany) and Croatia.

PA 07 | Knowledge Society

Priority Area 7 “To develop the Knowledge Society (research, education and ICT)” is coordinated by Slovakia and Serbia.

PA 08 | Competitiveness

Priority Area 8 “To support the competitiveness of enterprises” is coordinated by the Land Baden-Württemberg (Germany) and Croatia.

PA 09 | People & Skills

Priority Area 9 of the EUSDR “To invest in people and skills” is coordinated by Austria and Moldova.

PA 10 | Institutional capacity and cooperation

Priority Area 10 “To step up institutional capacity and cooperation” is coordinated by the City of Vienna (Austria) and Slovenia.

PA 11 | Security

Priority Area 11 of the EUSDR “To work together to tackle security and organised crime” is coordinated by Germany and Bulgaria.

For ecological sustainability, different Priority Areas have a different importance. The priorities are not only technological and ecological results but also the creation of the environmental conditions under which the river and the region is used.

These are examples in which ecological sustainability is touched, but, for example, institutional capacity and cooperation is also one of the results of this demand.

Presently, these structures of the EUSDR are growing while provoking new problems in cooperation. It is not an easy job to create efficiency, because not only the problems are difficult, but also the engagement in cross-border cooperation is a partly new experience for administrations, governments and politics.

Meanwhile, it is quite clear that it will have interesting results for all the partners involved. Some of the problems are, without any doubt, the differentiated political situation in the countries along the river Danube, the various set of priorities and the ways of financing. To say it quite straight: there is enough money, but sometimes actors do not find the best way to use it with success. However, this is also a kind of sustainability, which is extremely important for the ecological situation.