

Chapter 2

Title

**The Danube Region Culture
among Versatile Communities
with Emphasis on Art as an Integrating Instrument**

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There can be no doubt that the Danube Region exists but is there any such thing as Danubian culture? One may pose the question: is not the Danubian civilization like a piece of fiction, a myth or legend just like the “imaginary Middle-earth world”¹ in Tolkien? It was once part of the Roman Empire, the Habsburg Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. The ancient times of imperial empires and monarchies ended but the nations crossed by the river and their borders have been undergoing constant changes for ages to come.

Years ago, this region was known as *Mitteleuropa*. The concept came from Germany and it is a German word, describing the idea of central Europe – “an over-state above the states, an empire above empires, a German-dominated buffer zone in the centre of Europe, created by the merging of the German and Austrian Empires” (Pilch Ortega and Schröttner, 2012: 119). The Old Mitteleuropa conjures up the concept and hope of a united Europe. The Hungarian novelist György Konrád considers this particular world “...noble, but at the same time vague and generic” (Magris, 2001: 268).

In fact, the Danubian culture exists and it also corresponds to the first agrarian society in Central and Eastern

¹ Middle-earth is the setting of much of J.R.R. Tolkien’s legendary fantasy world, e.g., *The Lord of the Rings*.

Europe. Australian archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe coined the term and notion, the beginning of which dates back to 5500 BC. The Danube Region nowadays is a real European melting pot undergoing endless metamorphosis due to a constant flow of people. The whole area is embraced by the European Strategy for Danube Region with the aim of integrating it.

Although countries and national supremacy change, there is one thing that is constant in this region – namely, its river. It is the second largest in Europe, but it is also the most important one because it connects the greatest number of towns. The River Danube flows through the vast region of Central and South-East Europe. Two streams, the Breg and Brigach, jointly give rise to the river. The united Danube crosses different lands, cultures, it tells its stories in different languages. People who live around the Danube have created their unique culture, which reflects their life and is passed down in oral stories, folk tales, and artistic creations such as myths, legends, pieces of music, painting or architectural style. Moreover, the culture of the countries in the Danube Basin is also visible in different spheres of life whether it is artistic, sporting, political or social.

Indeed, in the Danube Region, the river plays a crucial role in everyday life. It is literally a source of water, a means of transport and a demarcation line that separates different communities. It flows, gives life and provides a sense of travel with a destination in mind. For many years, it used to be the main trade route across Europe. The river has a duality about it: it is a place of work for fishermen, barge sailors, power plant personnel, shipyard workmen, and a place for leisure attractions like: swimming, sunbathing, boating, as well as dining and tasting wine, for there are many vineyards on the river banks. Metaphorically, the river may be seen as the human longing to reach a destination, one that fulfils dreams and provides them with a meaning

or an explanation. Symbolically, it can be viewed as a flux of water flowing down into the sea, as a current against which one swims, or as fertility, death and renewal. It reminds the journey of Odysseus (known as Ulysses in Roman mythology) who looks for self-fulfilment in search of his roots. Perhaps one needs to experience the vastness and emptiness of the sea to feel like Ulysses on his journey. Sailing on the Danube from the Black Forest to the Black Sea is like meandering from one mystery to another. That is why it is so difficult to grasp. Our world is becoming supranational and this is what is happening to the Danubian Region too, where the differences between nations and countries are merging into one timeless identity. A variety of languages intertwines with its multicultural people speaking a multitude of voices and accents. Even the currency changes across borders in spite of the single currency in parts of the European Union – the Euro. Even though, we all cherish our home, our roots and origins, and we all find it comforting to be part of one tribe and one geographical area, there is a sense of oneness here as the borders and boundaries dissolve and vanish. Variety may breed unity as it does here in the Danubian area. The Danubian culture might be perceived as a unique culture particular to this specific region where the Danube plays a central role. In this sense, “Danubian Culture is a fortress which offers excellent shelter against the threat of the world, the assaults of life and fears of losing oneself in perfidious reality” (Magris, 2001: 155). To acquaint or familiarize oneself with these different countries and understand how they influence each other, one must become the traveller who undertakes this Odyssey. However,

“A traveller, writes Jean Paul, is like an invalid, poised between two worlds. The way is long, even if we move only from the kitchen to the room facing west, its window-panes catching the blaze of the horizon, because the house is a vast, unknown

kingdom and one lifetime is not enough for the odyssey from nursery to bedroom, ...one lifetime will not accommodate the attempt to say something about this coming-and-going between kitchen and dining-room, between Troy and Ithaca" (Magris, 2001: 85).

The culture of the Danube Basin comprises a vast history of the Celts, the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Habsburg Empire, the Austro-Bohemian Culture, Ottoman Turks, the Jews, the Roman-Muslim Empire and Nazi Germany. Its history is as rich as its art. Those various, prolific cultures interweave and their art mirrors this.

Art as an integrating instrument Art, which among others reflects culture, might be a uniting force of this region. Some themes of art are universal such as love, time, family ties, friendship, myths etc. Although particular plots are influenced by history, the trauma of war, and a sense of what happened or is happening in the region: conflict, war or migration. These themes have their messages for the various cultures and open the way to cultural dialogue.

As the Danube is a pearl of the region, I would like to stress the meaning of the river with its running water as a recurrent motif used by artists. In fact, the River Danube is reflected in various works of art, and it even goes beyond countries bordering the Danube and their boundaries. The water flows, borders change, people move and travel upstream and downstream. This flow reflects the movement of people. Each one of us might have a secret dream to flow down the river towards the sea, to yield to the current, to keep going forever ahead.

Undeniably, the Danube brings everything together, cements this region. However, it is never still or silent. The flow of the river reflects the transience of time; the flight of the waters is as fragile and elusive as life itself

with all its irreversibility. The Danube has been a source of inspiration for many artists in different forms of art.

Literature In literature both travelling and the Danube are the subjects of various books, e.g., Jules Verne's book *The Pilot of the Danube*. The story goes beyond the country's boundaries. This journey depicts the Odyssey of the Danubian fisherman, the prize winner of the "Danubian League of Amateur Fishermen", who crosses different countries as he travels down the river.

Travelling represents a longing for metamorphosis. The span of one's lifetime is a journey of one's own odyssey. In this context I should mention Claudio Magris's *Danube*, cited here many times, a large cultural-historical essay. It is also a piece of fiction where one meets different characters travelling and visiting various countries and regions of the Danube Basin. Another travel tale is *The Danube* novel by Hungarian journalist Nick Thorpe depicting the author's upstream journey from the mouth of the river to its sources. On the way he meets various dwellers living on the river banks.

The beauty and charm of the Danube is also reflected in poetry. Friedrich Hölderlin's hymn "The Ister"² emphasizes the beauty and uniqueness of this river. Ister is another name for the Danube; both names were used respectively for its upper and lower courses. The hymn glorifies the beautiful dwellings, rich vegetation, singing birds, and the shadow of the trees lining it, helping to rest and relax. Another song related to the Danube is "The Song of the Latin kind"³ written by a Romanian author Constantin Vasilescu. The ditty is dedicated to

² "The Ister" is a hymn written by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin published in *Hymns and Fragments*. It speaks about the Danube. <https://poetry.princeton.edu/2013/05/18/holderlins-river/>

³ "Cântecul Gintei Latine" is the Romanian title of the song translated into English as "The Song of the Latin kind". You may find a translation at <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/c%C3%A2ntecul-gintei-latine-song-latin-kind.html>

the Romanian poet Vasile Alecsandri who won a poetry contest. It shows how the Danube inspires artists. Those living in the neighborhood are spiritually influenced by the river's beauty. The music of the river inspires artists to write songs of joy and pain. The poem is sung by other contemporary Romanian artists, such as Radu Cimpoi.

Moreover, the Danube Basin is rich in folk stories and fairy tales like *The Danube Queen* by Maria Ďurčiková, a Slovenian writer. It is a collection of short stories for children, describing fairy tales and myths related to the river, fishermen and local people living near Bratislava. Another piece of fiction where the characters travel up the Danube valley is *The Earth's Children Saga* by Jean M. Auel. It is also a travel tale where the main characters are in search of their origins and meet children of other nationalities. The story talks about the idea of cultural complexity.

It is not surprising that artists of the Danubian Region are often of mixed origins and represent various nationalities. Among them, there was Franz Kafka – a German-language writer of Jewish parents, born in Prague, or Milan Kundera – a Czech writer who moved to France after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops. Apart from these names, it is worth to mention Václav Havel, who was a writer, playwright and the 1st President of the Czech Republic. Many of the artists travelled a great deal during their lifetime. Thus, many artists may agree that life is a journey like an ocean.

Painting and Sculpture The River Danube with its wide spectrum of colours: yellow, green, dark green, blue and indigo endlessly inspires painters of this region. The Danube School or Donau School was popular here with the painters of the 16th century in Bavaria and Austria (along the Danube valley). The major centres were Regensburg, Vienna and its monasteries. The German School Painters are known for landscape painting. Among them were Albrecht Altdorfer, Wolf Huber or Augustin Hirschvo-

gel. They searched for harmony with nature and believed that people should live in compliance with nature. The most important themes here were architecture and landscape: forests and hills of the Danube valley. The river influenced the colourful palette of painters; some works had a fairy tale style. The landscapes with architecture significantly outnumbered the portraits. This style of painting relied on detailed observation of nature, and man was perceived as an integral part of nature.

Other well-known painters from the Danube Valley are Gustav Klimt, Austrian symbolist painter, the most prominent member of the Vienna Secession movement, known for the highly decorative style, or Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Austrian painter, designer and architect – an opponent of straight lines and standardisation. His best-known work is the colourful, extravagant and uneven Hundertwasser House in Vienna. In the Czech Republic everyone will recognise Alphonse Mucha, representing Czech Art Nouveau. He was a decorative artist who produced many illustrations, advertisements, postcards, designs and stained glasses decorating churches.

Nowadays, we may hear about contemporary artists such as Florian Schmidt, painter and sculptor in Krems on the Danube or the avant-garde sculptors in Prague: David Černý, whose controversial eye-catching works are placed in many public locations, and Michal Cimala, creator of alternative musical instruments, painter, sculptor and music performer.

Music Swinging, tinkling river...

The river makes a sound. It trickles, murmurs, hums and gives an echo. To put it simply, it inspires composers and musicians to write melodies of this region. One of the best-known masterpieces of this region is Johann Strauss' waltz '*On the Beautiful Blue Danube*'. This is what usually comes to mind first as we think of the Danube Region. It is definitely

the most emblematic tune inspired by this river. This famous waltz soon became a secret anthem of Austria. It is played every year at midnight on New Year's Eve and is like a lucky charm for the following year. In Vienna, people dance the Viennese waltz at balls each year. The music has had a social role for years connecting people and making them merry. But it is interesting that the river is rarely blue unlike in the title of waltz. It is yellow, greenish, brown, greyish or even indigo, but hardly ever blue.

This region and particularly Vienna is the world capital of music and a homeland of classic composers like Strauss, Mozart, Mahler, Schubert, Haydn or Beethoven. Their roots were often complicated. For example, Ludwig Van Beethoven was born in Bonn and then moved to Vienna. Also, Franz Liszt's history is complicated. He was born in Hungary, received piano lessons in Vienna, then moved to Paris, and on his way there, he visited and composed in Germany and Poland. His ancestors were migrant Danube Swabians. What is surprising is that Franz Liszt did not speak Hungarian.

The Danubian Basin is richly endowed with music. The citizens of the Czech Republic are very musical. The famous composers of this region were Antonin Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana. Among the most prominent composers in Hungary were Ferenc Lehár and Béla Bartók.

Moreover, the Danube delta is rich in traditional folk music. There are many local festivals in each country, e.g., the *Spring Festival* in Budapest or the *Budapest Fringe Festival* where Hungarian and foreign artists meet, a Hungarian folk ensemble – *The Danube Folk Ensemble* is also named after the river, and the *International Prague Music Festival* or the *Prague Jazz Festival AghaRTA*. One should not forget the annual *Festival of Conversation for Culture and Science – “Flow”* organised in different countries of the Danube Basin each year.

However, the waltz tunes and music by Johann Strauss has made the Danube famous around the whole world.

The motif of *The Blue Danube waltz* is the soundtrack of various international films such as *True Lies*, *Hannibal*, *Heaven's Gate*, *The Age of Innocence*, *Titanic*, *Anywhere But Here*, *The Great Santini*, *White Marriage*, *The Space Odyssey*, *The Fateful Adventures of the Good Soldier Švejk During the World War* based on a satirical anti-war novel by Jaroslav Hašek. The widely recognised composition *Also Sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss vigorously opens *The Space Odyssey* directed by Stanley Kubrick.

River or water is inspiration for many musicians and one may hear its influence in Hasidic songs called “dunai”, which are mostly lullabies named after the Danube. Moreover, the Danube figures prominently in the Bulgarian national anthem, as a symbolic representation of the country's national beauty.

Last but not least, Vienna, the town on the Danube, organised *the Eurovision Song Contest* in 2015, which invited artists from various countries. Generally, the festival was invented for representatives of countries being members of the European Union. In fact, it has spread beyond to such countries as Israel or Azerbaijan who have performed in it. In addition, there are two more professional Eurovision Festivals, *the Eurovision Young Musicians* and *the Eurovision Young Dancers*.

Film The Danube also provides wonderful scenery for shooting pictures. In fact, it is the subject of various films such as the *Ister* directed by David Barison and Daniel Ross, a documentary film inspired by the lecture of the German philosopher Heidegger on the poem “Ister”. It is a documentary where interviewees discuss philosophy on their way upstream the Danube towards its source. In addition, parts of the German road movie *Im Juli* take place along the Danube. The main characters are on their life journey. They fall in and out of love. There is also a British psychological thriller *Bad Timing* directed by Nicolas Roeg, where the border crossing over the

Danube between Bratislava and Vienna is a recurrent site, or *The Blue Danube Waltz* film directed by Miklós Jancsó. Finally, in the *Star Trek* universe, the Danube-class runabout is an airship.

There are many other famous films directed in the Danube Basin known in different parts of the world such as an authorised adaptation *Nonsferatu* based on the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. This German film was directed in 1922 in Oravsky Podzamok, in the village castle erected on a rocky hill. According to the writer's narration, Count Dracula lived in the Transylvania Region. Another important film was the Oscar-winning *Amadeus* depicting the life of Amadeus Mozart directed by Miloš Forman set in Prague. The director is also renowned for Hollywood productions such as *Hair* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. One should not forget the satirical anti-war film about *the Good Soldier Švejk*.

Other local productions are focused on universal subjects such as love depicted in the Czech film *Zelary* based on the novel by *Květa Legátová* (produced in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria), or the Bulgarian epic film *Doomed Souls* (*Осъдени Души - Bulgarian title*) with a Polish actor, Jan Englert, who gained fame and friendship in Bulgaria.

The world-acclaimed artist from Austria and living beyond its borders is Michael Haneke who won an Oscar several times for his productions. The integration of various cultures takes place at an international film festival organised in Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic. It is the second oldest film festival in Europe after that of Venice.

Architecture The River Danube gives unique form and colour, underlining the significance of blue, ochre, orange and yellow, which resonates with the region's architectural style. One may see many yellow-ochre buildings or blue ones with reddish tiles. The cities around it often reflect

the style of other towns. Budapest is, for example, a happy mix of such, an imitation of other styles. It resembles Vienna and Paris. It has an eclectic style that reminds the mixtures of styles – the archaic meets the most modern skyscrapers. The eclecticism of Budapest conjures up the Tower of Babel. The influence of the Habsburg and Austrian Empires is visible. Such an endless and everlasting mix is visible everywhere in the architectural style, in food traditions, in spoken and written languages.

The poet Wolfgang Schmelztl “compares Vienna to Babel, because he says he hears people round him speaking Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, French, Turkish, Spanish, Bohemian, Slovenian, Italian, Hungarian, Dutch, Syrian, Croatian, Serbian, Polish and Chaldean” (Magris, 2001: 176).

What is spectacular about the landscape of the river and its banks are their numerous castles and monasteries erect upon them. The River Danube cements this region, “The Danube threads towns together like a string of pearls” (Magris, 2001: 256). The serpentine river flows through four capitals: Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade. The Danube also hosts other cities of cultural interest such as: Ulm with the world’s tallest cathedral spire, antique Pasawa, Melk, Krems, and Vukovar – often called “The Hero Town” for its fate during the war in former Yugoslavia, or Novi Sad – the second largest cultural city in Serbia, where many festivals take place, e.g., the music and the international literature festival. There are beautiful old abbeys in Melk and Krems.

In towns, different cultures are blended and interwoven with different ethnicities: German, Austrian, Jewish or Turkish. The Habsburg style is noticeable, e.g., in Prague, Budapest, Bratislava etc. Another oriental influence is visible throughout the whole Danube Basin, for example in Hungary the Turks left behind beautiful minarets and domes. In Prague, one will find many Jewish traces.

There are numerous extremely picturesque bridges on the Danube. They are not only useful in connecting and spanning its banks, but also possess great aesthetic value. The bridges give a unique atmosphere to this area especially when they are illuminated at dusk. Among the many beautiful bridges in Vienna, Budapest, Bratislava, there used to be a friendship bridge in Serbia. However, it was destroyed by the bombings during the Bosnian war.

Versatile communities in the Danube Region The Danubian culture is composed of various nationalities, ethnicities and identities. People who live in this region, and particularly those living in the border regions, have often a complex identity and they often have a ‘multi-national mind’. They are often unable to identify their own origin, as it is too complex. The families are composed of mixed couples and their stories are often heterogeneous. Moreover, the number of marriages between different nationalities is on the increase.

As a result of historical migration and war within a particular country, there is a mix of different nationalities or ethnic groups. Minorities are treated differently as for the majority of people immigrants are only considered as passing citizens, not original inhabitants. These people often experience discrimination and feel they do not have equal rights. Moreover, the process of assimilation takes years.

The world has become more and more transnational. We travel without limit as borders are open. The number of people that are on the move due to the conflict in Syria resembles a “human river” which is endlessly flowing with different languages interwoven or entwined on its borders.

Invasions and immigrations have been shaking the Danubian Region for long making it an issue for centuries. What we are currently experiencing is an unprecedented influx of people. It brings to mind the European myth of the wandering Jew⁴

⁴ The wandering Jew is a fictional figure whose legend began to spread in Europe in the 13th century.

who is cursed to walk on earth until the second coming of Jesus. The exact nature of the wanderer's fault or sin varies in different versions of the tale, as do aspects of his character. The wanderer experiences pain and an everlasting need to change places. The recent migration resonates with this tale.

Migration brings devastation, transformation, but also enables development. The latter comes with time. At the moment Europe is divided on the subject how we should deal with mass immigration. There are countries that are protesting and strengthening their borders against migrants from Africa and the Middle East. This is understandable as throughout history these countries were afflicted by numerous invasions. Hungary for instance, has experienced many migrations: "...Huns and Avars, Slavs and Magyars, Tartars and Kumans, Jazigs and Pechenegs, Turks and Germans are superimposed and deposited one upon another in layer after layer. The migrations of peoples bring devastation, but also civilizations, like the Turks, who not only brought plunder but also the culture of Islam" (Magris, 2001: 242).

Minorities usually try to assert their own identity. Sometimes they fight for independence, language, education, the right to celebrate their religious festivals and practice their faith. Among them, there are also those who want to assimilate. They learn the language of their adoptive country and obey the rules. Past experience shows that this merge and melt is inevitable: "... all histories and all identities are composed of these differences, these pluralities, these exchanges and borrowings of diverse ethnic and cultural elements, which make each nation and individual the child of regiment" (Magris, 2001: 178).

Conclusions The Danube Delta region is a mirage consisting of multiple images, various nationalities, ethnic groups, different architectural styles and castles on the banks. It seems to be united despite its complexity and different history. It could be called

a world without frontiers. However, the current situation is changing the scene. The ongoing crisis in migration divides countries and communities and affects citizens' lives. There are hard-line politicians who are trying to protect their countries against the flood of people. They fear the future and reject new ethnic groups. Yet, changes are inevitable. Soon there will be many more people, many more minorities and ethnicities in every country. The vision of Europe under the influence of other unfamiliar cultures, in this case the Arab culture, may pose a threat. The Arab culture is associated in the collective imagination with fanaticism and terrorism.

Each country has its own traditions. Traditions, customs and beliefs should be treated seriously, as they constitute the citizens' daily life. However, a new culture might add value to a given nation and fructify in the future. The idea that each country has its own distinct culture explains the attitudes and values of its members. It unites but also raises voices of discontent. Supranational culture borrows, imitates and follows other cultures. Culture, in fact, is created in relation to other cultures. What is interesting, the individual in the contemporary world is far more complex, usually collecting various cultural identities throughout his life. It might be the result of various factors: location, race, history, nationality, language and even aesthetics.

One way of bringing people together is by sharing common values and beliefs. It might be achieved, for instance, through culture that by its principal disposition is opening up to contact and carries dialogue within. It is the way we communicate; we get to know each other, learn our differences and the way we form relationships. Art as an element of culture might be a good point of contact between various communities as it may transgress differences by sharing and exchanging ideas. It might also be achieved by education or tourism. Education sets standards for acceptance and toler-

ance, and tourism naturally enables people to meet other societies. Its development could also enable us to learn about lesser-known cultures.

An example of education bringing together the world a little closer, is founding the multinational DANUBIAN UNIVERSITY comprising among others: the Danube University Krems, the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, or the Danube Rectors' Conference and Summer School. Integration might also be achieved by learning other nations' languages and learning about the history of the region. Additionally, there are many artists or scientists who write about different cultures bringing the diverse societies closer. Another idea is creating national cultural institutes with a space for exchanging ideas. Culture comes into nature, as Roland Barthes⁵ observed. Our individual stories create myth that with time becomes our tale.

The River Danube naturally cements *the countries and communities living around it with their multinational heritage*. However, it also brings discord as seen throughout history. The upper and lower limits of the river are slightly different. However, it remains a unique river. Despite the numerous political changes in the course of its history, the natural Danubian regions such as the Black Forest, Bavaria, the Wachau Valley, Pannonia, Moravia, Transylvania, the Balkans or the Black Sea are still the same.

Taking into account the current enormous population shifts entering through that part of Europe, the inter-cultural dialogue will be of outmost importance in the near future. This dialogue might be initiated through art, education or tourism. I strongly believe that in times of strife art should not be forgotten as it might bring hope and help solve misunderstandings, as it appeals to values, aesthetics and is at the root of new ideas. Moreover, art mingles with daily life

⁵ Roland Barthes is the French author working on theory of myths. Roland Barthes's *Mythologies: A Critical Theory of Myths*.

and even materializes in utilitarian everyday items such as souvenirs for tourists.

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