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THE DANUBE VALLEY – GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS

ДОЛИНАТА НА РЕКА ДУНАВ – ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИ АСПЕКТИ

Дунав, втората по големина река в Европа, е дълга 2 860 км и събира водите си от 805 300 кв. км, което представлява 8% от цялата площ на континента. Тази голяма река извира от планината Шварцвалд и, след като прекосява територията на 11 европейски държави, се влива в Черно море на територията на Румъния. Дунав е органично свързан с Румъния и геостратегическото му положение е в пълна хармония с геостратегическите интереси на страната.

За европейската, и особено за румънската територия, Дунав е бил и продължава да бъде важно място на събиране на територии – между юга и севера, между запада и изтока. Тъй като Дунав пресича континента от запад на изток, той има важно геостратегическо значение, което може да се проследи и в историческа перспектива.

От незапомнени времена Дунав представлява плавателен път, който концентрира интереса на европейските велики сили. В античността реката е не само воден, но и стратегически път, тъй като играе ролята на граница между гръко-римския, германския и гето-дакийския свят. Атаките на преселващите се народи, които откриват нови територии и се заселват по Дунав, предизвикват нови промени в геополитическата позиция на региона. Така се установяват нови граници между старите дунавски и новопоявилите се славянски народи. Издигането на Османската империя придава нова геополитическа и геостратегическа важност на реката. Силната империя използва икономическите и политически интереси в региона и спорове между западните държави.

В края на XIX в. (1869 г.) се отваря Суецкият канал и така търговските връзки с Азия (Индия) стават по-лесни през Черно море. Румъния и Дунав навлизат в световния търговски кръг, наложен от новите търговски пътища между Западна Европа и Ориента.

Двадесетото столетие предефинира геополитическата роля на Дунав. В началото на века технически проблеми, свързани с плаването, спират възможността Дунав да се превърне в плавателна река и път за Европа.

След Втората световна война друга сила – колосът СССР, налага влиянието си в дунавското пространство благодарение на факта, че най-голямата част от плавателния път е разположена в рамките на комунистическия блок. СССР доминира в Европейската комисия за Дунав, която е сформирана от всички дунавски държави. След 1990 г., и

особено след създаването на плавателния канал Рейн–Майн–Дунав, реката играе важна геостратегическа роля благодарение на канала Дунав–Черно море, но също така и геополитическа роля за европейската интеграция. В условията на мултиполюсна световна икономика Дунав, благодарение на интегриращата си роля, може да засили връзките между европейските държави и да определи инициативите за някои сътрудничества на европейско (а и на световно) ниво, за развитието на стратегии и създаването на икономически сътрудничества.

Като дунавска страна Румъния е основен бенефициент на възможностите, предлагани от Дунав и стратегиите за икономическо развитие на страната могат да разчитат на този важен компонент на нейното пространство.

Ключови думи: геополитика, Дунав, Европа.

Introduction

The existence, the evolution of the peoples and the development of the nations are closely related to the waters, especially the large rivers, and the awareness of the importance of the position related to the waters contributes to the consolidation of the economic, political, cultural, geopolitical and geostrategic power (Andrei 2009: 116). The fact that the great civilisations appeared and developed along the large rivers is not random, because the advantages of living and surviving offered by the hinterland of the larger rivers led to the development of civilisation. The Indo-European civilisation and, implicitly, the European one appeared on the banks of the Danube, which is the largest navigable way that crosses Europe from the east to the west, and the oldest of the peoples, the Romanian people, whose Traco-Dacian roots are deeply anchored in the Romanian land, in the Carpathian–Danubian–Pontic space, is located in the basin of the Pontic, lower Danube (Andrei 2007: 19).

The Danube – geopolitical and geostrategic implications

The Danube, because it crosses the European continent from west to east, has an important geostrategic position, and the connections through the Black Sea to the Orient and the planetary ocean offers a geopolitical importance, which can be observed over time.

The second river in size in Europe, with 2860 km in length, the Danube gathers its waters on a surface of around 805,300 km², which represents 8% from the total surface of Europe. The large river springs from the Black Forest Mountains and after it crosses the territories of 11 European states, it flows into the Black Sea on the territory of Romania.

The Danube is organically connected to the territory of Romania and its geostrategic interest is in full concordance with the geostrategic position of Romania. The territory of our country is crossed, in its southern part, by the Danube on a length of 1075 km (1/3 of its total length), of which 700 km form the state's natural border

with the Republic of Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine, and the rest of 375 km flows exclusively on Romanian territory. Regarding the hydrographical basin, 33% belongs to Romania, thus, besides Germany, the largest shares of the territorial statistics of the Danube are owned by our country (Brîteanu 1991).

From a geostrategic and geopolitical point of view, Romania represents a bridge between Occidental Europe, on the one hand, and Eastern Europe and the Orient, on the other hand. The Danube is the tool through which this connection is achieved, because it constitutes not only a national or regional interest, but also an international interest. This river constitutes the European corridor that connects the North Sea to the Black Sea, creating the easy transition between the north of Europe, the south-east of Europe and the south-west of Asia (Cucu 1996: 40).

From times immemorial, the Danube represented an important navigable route that raised the interest of the great powers of Europe, from the different periods of history (Cârțână 1972).

In antiquity, the Danube represented not only an important river way, but also a strategic one, playing the role of a border between the Greek-Roman, the German and the Geto-Dacian worlds. The strategic and military role of the Danube was firstly emphasised by the Greeks, who had several attempts to conquer the Danube during the Macedonian Empire (during the ruling of Philip II and Alexander the Great), but also by the Romans who had always had as purpose the conquest of the territories located to the north of the Danube. Upstream, the border line between the Roman and the German worlds was set on the upper Danube, while the middle and the lower Danube ceased to be a state border, after the conquest of Dacia, and the Romans gained the strategic and military role of the Danube, and especially the economic one.

The attacks of the migrating peoples, who found favourable territories when they settled in the Danubian basin and, especially near the Danube, determined new changes of the Danubian geopolitical position. Thus, new borders were created between the old Danubian peoples and, especially, the Slavic ones. During the Middle Ages, the strategic role of the Danube was reduced, but its economic role was preserved through the harbours of the middle and lower course.

The rise of the Ottoman Empire would give new geopolitical and geostrategic values of the river. The strong empire, using the economic and political interests of the area and the disputes between the countries of Occidental Europe, managed to dominate the flow of the Danube from central Hungary until the discharge into the sea within a period of almost a century and a half (1389–1526). The Turkish ruling over Danube and the exclusion from the economic circuit of the Mediterranean Sea and of the Black Sea by the sailors and the west-European merchants led to the exclusion of the Danube from the sphere of interest of Western and Central Europe for several centuries.

In 1683, “the Oriental matter” was opened, after the defeat of the Turkish army at Vienna, the great European powers being interested in the Danube and the sharing of the domination over it. From then on, the Danube entered another period, the geopolitical interest bringing new mutations on the ruling of the Danube flow.

In the 18th century, Austria and Russia, through the means of military conflicts, aimed at the extension of their influence up to the Romanian Danube. During the Russian-Turkish wars (1716–1718), through the Passarovitz Peace, the Habsburg Empire received the navigational right on the Danube, up to the Black Sea. In 1774, as a consequence of the Kuciuk Kainargi Peace, another great power, Russia, received the right to navigate on the Danube and the Black Sea. After 1789, due to the events in Occidental Europe, Austria gave up the Danubian matters leaving place of action for the Russians, who, in 1812 (the Bucharest Peace) occupied Basarabia, thus taking total control over the Danube outlet. During this period, although the Danube flowed through Romanian territory, the river belonged to other states from a geopolitical and economic point of view.

At the end of the 18th century, the great powers like France and England showed interest in the Danube and its discharge into the Black Sea, but the major changes took place in the 19th century.

The most important event was the Adrianople Treaty (1829), when the Ottoman Empire lost the supremacy, and the Turnu, Giurgiu and Braila districts on the Romanian Danube were suspended, those becoming towns of the Romanian Countries, and the Danube becoming the southern border. Together with the changed geopolitical role, economic changes occurred, the Danube having a navigable and a trading role of European interest.

Following the Crimean War and the Congress of Paris (1856), Russia gave back Basarabia, including the Danube outlet, and thus the navigation on the river became free. In order to supervise the free navigation on the Danube, the European Commission was founded and it consisted of the representatives of the great powers, with the head office in Galati. As a premier, the Congress of Paris offered the river a European dimension.

The congress of Berlin and the peace treaties with which the war ended in 1878 conferred Romania the right on the Romanian Danube, but also brought Russia back on the geopolitical scene, as a Danubian power. The decisions of the Congress of Berlin split the Danube in two segments: one Austrian-Hungarian, which consisted of the middle Danube including the Iron Gates, and the Romanian Danube under the control of the European Commission. These decisions upset the small river countries (Romania, Serbia) and thus, the rivalry between the small powers was added to the one between the great powers.

The geopolitical status of the Danube changed after 1883, when Germany intensified its connections with Romania, neglecting the ones with the Austro-

Hungarian state. Thus, Romania became the main trading partner of Germany, and the Danube – the main transition route of the merchandise to the Ottoman Empire.

At the end of the 19th century (1869), the Suez Channel was opened, thus the trading connections with Asia (India) became easier through the Black Sea, Romania and the Danube entering the world economic circuit, imposed by the new trading routes between Occidental Europe and the Orient.

The 20th century redefined the geopolitical role of the Danube. At the beginning of the century the technical problems connected with the navigation on the Danube (the Gorges sector and the maritime Danube) prevented the river of becoming the navigable route of Europe.

After the hard period of World War I, in 1921, in Paris, a Convention was drawn up through which the status of the Danube was set, deciding the freedom of navigation on all the pavilions of the navigable course, under equal conditions. During this period, the geopolitical role of France, Italy, and England grew and the geopolitical role of Germany and Russia decreased regarding the Danubian problem, situation maintained until the end of the inter-war period.

At Sinaia, in 1938, an agreement was signed in which Romania held the control over the Danube, although England, France, Germany were fighting for the control over the Romanian Danube.

During World War II, Germany became the largest power in the European and Danubian space, ensuring until 1944 the control over the navigable course of the Danube, with the geopolitical importance on the Eastern front.

After World War II, another power, the USSR colossus imposed itself in the Danubian space through the fact that the largest part of the navigable route could be found in the communist block. The Soviet Union dominated the European Commission of the Danube, formed by the river states. Again, in history, the Danube would become divided, this time in the Austro-Hungarian sector and the Soviet sector.

In the period after 1990 and after the navigable corridor Rhine-Main-Danube, the river played an important geostrategic role, through the Danube-Black Sea Channel, but also geopolitical, of European integration. Under the conditions of a multi-polar world economy, the Danube, through its integrating role, may intensify the interdependence relation between the European states and may determine the initiative of some collaborations at a continental level (even world level), of the development strategies and the creation of some organisms of economic cooperation.

The Danube – its importance as a river route

The main European communication route imposes itself with a series of features among the other European rivers.

Firstly, the Danube is an important geostrategic route, being the river that crosses the entire continent as a median axis. Also, the connection with the planetary

ocean makes the Danube *the river with the five seas*. Which are these seas? They are some of the most important ones in the economic flux: the Black Sea, the North Sea (through the connection with the Rhine-Main-Danube Channel), the Adriatic Sea, the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. The Danube, as a natural border between the European states, imposes itself geostrategically. The countries on the river closely depend on it in their economies, while the economies of other European states are tributary to the Danube, so that any minor change of a geostrategic type would be able to create economic unbalances with less favourable influences in the stability of the respective state. The integrating role of the Danube, in terms of economy and policy, is an additional argument for the support of the statement that the Danube represents a geostrategic route at a national, European and world level.

The Danube represents Europe's largest *navigable route*, especially after the building of the important transcontinental navigational connection (which links the North Sea to the Black Sea). Over time, the Danube preserved and developed this feature (Sobaru 1998). The navigation on this river existed during the time of the Dacians, those being well-known as good river sailors in the historical documents. The historian Arrian, describing one of the military trips of Alexander the Great to the north of the Danube (335 BC), wrote in his chronicles that the army crossed the river at night, using local boats made of tree trunks ("monoxile"): "For these boats were found in large numbers because the river people used them for fishing in the river, as well as for travelling to each other, and, not rarely, for plunders" (Giurăscu 1971). But the Greeks created colonies close to the river outlet, on the coast of the Black Sea, to ease trading with the inhabitants of Dacia. The Romans used the river as the main navigable route of the Empire, this connecting the western part with the eastern part of the Empire.

For all the European states and, especially, for the Great Powers, the Danube became the navigable route with profound implications, but for Romania this is organically related to the economic evolution and development as a European state. This feature of important navigable route gives the Danube the status of a pan-European and international river.

Due to the fact that the Danube is the navigable river, this becomes an important *trading route*. The trading relations are set not only between the river countries, but also between these and the other countries of the European continent and other states from other continents. The trading hinterland of the Danube may be extended at a European scale, and the economic importance is defined at a global scale (Andrei 2005).

Due to its physical, geographical and economic features, the Danube may be considered an *energy route*. There are many hydro-electrical plants and atomic-electrical plants built on the river, two large hydro-electrical plants operating on the territory or near Romania (the Iron Gates I and the Iron Gates II, built through cross-border cooperation) and two atomic-electrical plants, one on the Bulgarian bank

(Kozlodui), and the other on the territory of Romania (Cernavodă). The location of the atomic-electrical plants on the Danube bank is necessary because of the large quantities of water used to cool the reactors. These plants hold an important percentage from the energy balance of the respective countries, contributing to the economic cooperation of the states, but also offering certain energy independence necessary to each national economy (Popescu 1994).

Nowadays, the Danube represents an important *cultural route*, being the link between the German, Slavic, Romance and Oriental cultures (Smith 1992). The Danube can integrate these cultures in the great European culture and can consolidate the relationship between the other cultures on the other continents, especially the Asian one. The Danubian culture itself has a cosmopolite feature with global values.

Finally, the meaning of the Danube as a river route consists of: its trading and transportation importance, the cultural importance, which are primordial; its importance as an energy source; its importance for the national economy, especially for agriculture, fishing, but also for other economic sectors, and, last but not least, its tourist importance, the Danube and its Delta being a great source of benefits by creating a continuous tourist flow along the river, for the organisers, but also for the tourists.

Romania, through its position as a Danubian country, is the main beneficiary of all the opportunities offered by the river, the economic development strategies of our country counting on this vital component of its space (Posea 1999).

The Danube – cross-border facilities

The Danube has never functioned as a segregation element between the neighbouring territories, but, on the contrary, one can speak of the territorial convergence phenomenon and of ethnic osmosis within the population living on its banks. In other words, the connection between the populations on both sides of the banks has not been destroyed by the state border; this has never become a territorial discontinuity, but an element which has favoured the communication and the preservation of traditions, the languages spoken and the elements defining a people. To the south of the Danube, the population of Romanian origin, Walachs or Romanians, is much larger and keeps its ethnic identity, compared to the Bulgarians to the north of the Danube, who have migrated in order to practice agriculture in the favourable areas of Romania. The existence of the Romanian population, in large numbers, although some statistics of the respective states do not always show these numbers, has favoured the cross-border connections and the creation of some territorial cooperation structures between states, like the Euroregions (Guran-Nica 1997).

On the Romanian valley of the Danube, the conditions for the founding of some cross-border cooperation forms have already existed (Ilieş 2004). The Euroregions created in this Danubian sector are:

- ❖ The Danube – Criş – Mureş – Tisa Euroregion/ (DCMT)

The cooperation in this format has its origins in the *Bilateral Cooperation Agreement between Timiș (Romania) and Csongrad (Hungary)*, the *Regional Cooperation Protocol Danube – Mureș – Tisa* being signed in 1997. The partners in this format are 4 counties from Romania (Timiș, Arad, Caraș Severin, Hunedoara), 4 from Hungary (Csongrad, Bekes, Jacz Nagykun Szolnok, Bacs – Kiskun Kiskun) and the Voivodina region from Serbia. This cooperation has as objective the development and the widening of the relations between the local communities and authorities in the fields of economy, education, culture, health, science and sports, as well as the collaboration from the perspective of the European integration.

❖ *The Danube 21* Euroregion

The documents for the founding of the *Cross-border Collaboration Association “Danube 21”* were signed on 18 January 2002, at Vidin, by the mayors of the cities of Calafat, Vidin and Zaječar. It consists of urban and rural settlements from the river areas from Romania (the city of Calafat, the communes Poiana Mare, Desa, Cetate and Ciupercenii Noi), Bulgaria (the city of Vidin and the localities Ruzhintsi, Makrish, Belogradchik, Lom, Kula, Dimovo and Novo Selo) and Serbia (the city of Zaječar and the localities Sokobanja, Kladovo, Bolivat, Kniajevat, Bor, Negotin and Majdanpek).

The activity of the association enrolls within some work activities in fields regarding the strategic development of the Euroregion: culture and education, economic development, sports, tourism and youth activities, ecology, agriculture, health and social protection.

Through this collaboration, the authorities are looking for solutions to the common problems with which the areas located at a large distance from the administrative centres confront, like the lack of economic and transportation infrastructure, the dependence of agriculture, the low level of the economic development and a high rate of unemployment.

❖ *The Middle Danube – the Iron Gates* Euroregion

As a consequence of a common initiative of the county councils of Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, on 6 October 2005, at Vidin, the *Association Agreement and the “Middle Danube – the Iron Gates” Euroregion Statute* were signed and included the counties of Mehedinți (Romania), Vidin (Bulgaria) and the city of Kladovo–Bor District (Serbia).

In parallel, there is a collaboration at the level of the city halls of the cities of Drobeta – Turnu Severin, Orșova and Vidin, as well as between the Serbian and Romanian management of the “Iron Gates” National Park, to which the Bulgarian part wishes to join in the next period, after it will present an environmental project related to the park.

❖ *The Southern Danube* Euroregion

Created in March 2001, the Euroregion consists of cross-border cooperation associations from Romania and Bulgaria. On the Romanian side, the following are the members of the Euroregion: the Southern Danube Association, formed of the local councils of the cities of Alexandria, Turnu Măgurele, Roşiorii de Vede and Zimnicea (Teleorman county), and on the Bulgarian side, the “Evroregion Dunav Yug” Association. The Euroregion has its head office in Svishtov (Bulgaria). Its activity is small.

❖ *The Giurgiu – Russe Euroregion*

The signing at Giurgiu of the Collaboration Convention between Giurgiu and the municipality of Russe, led to the founding in 2001 of a new Euroregion. The municipality of Giurgiu and its member communes, the municipality of Russe and the non-governmental organisation The Municipal Energy Association of Russe are part of this Euroregion.

The major advantage is that the two cities are close and are located on the unique traffic route over the Danube with a road bridge and a railway bridge, “the Bridge of Friendship”. The border crossing is ensured by 5 customs points.

❖ *The Danubius Euroregion*

The Euroregion appeared in 2002 at the initiative of Giurgiu county from Romania and the District of Russe from Bulgaria. As a location it overlaps the Giurgiu-Russe Euroregion territory. The following administrative territories are included in this Euroregion: Giurgiu county and the surrounding communes, and from Bulgaria – the District of Russe, with a number of 8 municipalities. The Euroregion has a number of 298022 inhabitants on the Romanian side, among which 96% are Romanians and 3.9% are of Romany ethnicity, and on the Bulgarian side there are 250000 inhabitants, among which 27 inhabitants of Romanian origin and 635 of Walachs.

This Euroregion is advantaged by the existence of the only bridge over the Danube, the one from Giurgiu to Russe. All types of national and European communication routes pass through this Euroregion. Another advantage is the closeness to Bucharest, an important centre.

❖ *The Danube-Dobrudzha Euroregion*

This Euroregion was founded in 2002 and it is based on the cooperation agreements between structures of the local administration, non-governmental organisations.

As a position, it is located in the extreme eastern part of the Romanian-Bulgarian cross-border area. This is formed of the districts of Silistra and Dobrich (Bulgaria), which overlap the Quadrata, and the counties of Călraeşi, Constanţa and Ialomiţa in Romania. There live 1693522 inhabitants of the Euroregion, the largest part of the population belonging to the Romanian sector (79%), the Bulgarian territory having only 21%. In the two districts of the Euroregion, 69.53% represents the Bulgarians, 21.55% the Turkish people, 7.03% the Romany people. Walachs (534 persons) and

Romanians (57 persons) live in the two districts. 86 Bulgarians live in the three Romanian counties from the Euroregion, and the rest of the population being of Romanian origin.

The Euroregion benefits from a series of advantages, like: the uniform distribution of the transportation networks on the territory of the Euroregion that includes all types of transportation; the existence of a motorway sector that connects the Constana harbour with Bucharest; the crossing border points are fairly distributed; the entire area is crossed by national and European communication routes; the building of the Danube – the Black Sea Channel ensuring the connection between the localities on the Danube bank and the ones on the Black Sea coast.

Disadvantages also exist, like: the connection between the sectors found on the left and right bank of the Danube is done through a reduced number of connection bridges; the presence of an unbalance regarding the distribution of the population on a territory reflected by the 70% found in the eastern sector of the Danube; the unbalance in the density of the settlements.

❖ *The Lower Danube Euroregion*

This Euroregion was formed in a period of 5 years, starting in 1997, when the project of the Euroregion was launched by our country. Also in 1997, in Ukraine, the representatives of Romania, the Republic of Moldova and of Ukraine signed the “Declaration on the trilateral collaboration”. At Odessa, in 2001, the European Association of the Cross-border Regions (AERT/AERB) received the status of member.

It is located in the central-eastern part of Romania, the south of the Republic of Moldova and the south-east of Ukraine. Regarding the structure of the Euroregion we may say that it is formed of the following territories: the counties of Brrila, Galaiui, Tulcea that are part of Romania, Cahul County in the Republic of Moldova, the Odessa region in Ukraine.

The natural frame is formed of a reduced altitude relief, the highest altitude being the Greci peak, 487 m (the Macinului Mountains). The relief is fragmented by large valleys, and the Danube meadow is represented by a wide low surface, besides the Danube Delta. From an ethnical point of view, the Euroregion is mainly populated by Romanians.

A disadvantage within this Euroregion is the fact that the territorial structures, like the counties in Romania and the Republic of Moldova and the “region” type like the ones specific of Ukraine have determined a territorial unbalance. From this point of view, the Odessa region holds 62% of the Euroregion territory and 63% from the total population. Another disadvantage is the lack of bridges over the Danube, the only bridge which can be crossed is the one from Giurgeni – Vadu Oii. The same thing can be stated about the lack of land communication routes; there is only a

single connection by railway, like the one from Galați – Giurgiulecti – Reni that focuses on the travellers' flow between the three areas they live in.

This Euroregion has its own advantages, that is, the fact that since 2004 it is a NATO border, and from 2007 it is an external border of EU. Thus, we may say that the Romanian-Moldavian borders, the Romanian-Ukrainian borders benefit from a high standard of security in order to reduce the illegal entrance on the territory of the European Union.

The occurrence and the function of these Euroregions emphasise the possibilities of cross-border collaboration, based on the historical collaboration and the evolution of the Romanian people compared to the other neighbouring countries. Within United Europe, the existence of cross-border collaboration compared to the neighbouring countries will ease the relations between the states and the collaboration built for the communication between the respective local communes (Derrida 1997).

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