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# THE DANUBE: A EUROPEAN RIVER AS STREET, BRIDGE AND FRONTIER. AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

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## THE AUTHENTIC EUROPEAN RIVER – CONNECTING WEST AND EAST

The Danube represents the European river par excellence. On its 2,872-kilometer way it traverses the central areas of Southern Germany and it forms the axis of Central- and Southeastern Europe. The Danube runs, geographically singularly among the rivers of Europe, in a horizontal manner, in the direction of West to East while all the other large rivers—the Rhine, Elbe (Labe), Oder/Odra, Vistula and Volga—flow vertically from South to North or vice versa.

Since the universal turnaround of world politics in 1990, ten sovereign states call themselves direct abutters to the Danube. But the Danube area, the area which is not only geographically but also historically and culturally characterised by the Danube, is far more spacious and contains numerous countries and peoples of different language, religion and mentality.

Every person dealing with such an extensive topic has to structure his report and to refer to certain aspects, to certain angles of vision. In the following I would like to refer to the structure of the Danube as it is applied in geographical science: the Young Danube from its sources in the Black Forest up to Ulm which is the Baden and Wurttemberg area, then the in historical times already navigable Upper Danube between Ulm and Bratislava with the bordering countries Bavaria, Austria and Slovakia, followed by the Middle Danube leading through Hungary, Croatia and Serbia down to the Iron Gate, where the Danube breaks through the Carpathian Mountains, and finally the lower reaches of the Danube with the countries Romania and Bulgaria, the Lower Danube which merges into the wide Delta and the mouth, part of which are Moldavia and Ukraine.

The waters of the Danube reflect 3,000 years, in which the histories of the peoples at the river, of their societies and culture are testified by sources. For prehistory

and early history mainly archaeological sources are available for the historian. But for the Roman period and especially for the modern age and contemporary history a chronologically growing abundance of written documents and evidence is at our disposal. We should not forget the monuments and historical buildings along the river, which especially in Vienna practically surround one.

## **FUNCTIONS OF EUROPE'S "GREAT STREAM":**

### **STREET, BRIDGE – AND BORDER**

In the historical review of this period of almost 3,000 years the main question for the observer might refer to the function, the proposition of the river within its enormous catchment area between the Black Forest, the Alps, the Carpathian Mountains, the Balkans and the Black Sea. How did the people interpret this great stream, how did they “make use” of it?

By the way, “Great Stream”—in this sense: large, long and broad river—is supposed to be the translation of the maybe Celtic name of the Danube, which reads similarly in all the European languages: Danubius, Danube, Donau, Duna, Dunava, Dunarea, Tuna and so on. There existed an antique Greek name “Ister”, too, but Ister or “Histrios” referred only to the very easternmost, Greek-known part of the river, mainly its mouth into the Black Sea, the Pontos Euxeinus. Consequently the name “Ister” has vanished in subsequent history.

Let me look in a more detailed manner into the functions of the 2,857 kilometers of the Danube together with its large catchment area during the course of history.

Three different functions crystallise clearly: The street, the bridge, and the border. “Street”, on one hand can be understood as a peaceful traffic and sales’ route, on the other hand as a military road. A peaceful situation—coexistence and mutual cultural exchange—is a precondition for the function of the “bridge”.

And then there is the river as a “border”, as a frontier, a Limes, as a walling off from the “foreign”, the “strange”, such as it mostly occurs after military conflicts. No observer of history can avoid the painful, even bitter realisation that in the course of history the Danube has mainly served as a border. As in fact it does up until today. Let us remember: Until 20 years ago, there were “only” eight Danube countries, at present there are ten.

East of Vienna, three states have disappeared since 1990, namely Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, all of them federal states. Out of these emerged

five new states, which consider themselves nation-states employing the Danube as a borderline: Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Moldavia and Ukraine.

“Integration in the West, disintegration in the East” therefore was and is a slogan in the media which dominates past and present discussion about the Eastern and Southeastern enlargement of the European Union (EU): While Western Europe increasingly unites—despite of all current difficulties—and makes international borders disappear, a world of states develops in South Eastern Europe and also along the River Danube, a world defined by dissociation and bearing considerable potential for internal and international conflict.

Street, bridge, border—these three aims, these three dominant purposes the Danube has represented throughout the last 3000 years run like a thread through the Danube’s history. As a critical audience, you will object with good reason that street, bridge and border are most different if not opposing terms—after all, border does not go with bridge and not necessarily with street. The contradictory functions of the river show the immense complexity of the entire Danube area when referring to history and culture. It shows the inconsistent, differential interior history, which moreover always has been determined massively from outside, namely by the imperialistic great powers in East and West, whether Latin Rome, Byzantine and later Ottoman Constantinople, Habsburg Vienna, Prussian-German Berlin or Slav- Orthodox, later Soviet Russian Moscow.

Since 1990, we have experienced a hegemony turnaround towards the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty in Brussels. This changing massive influence of the great powers seems to be a constant in Danube history. Since the earliest times the great powers have torn the Danube area apart into a Western part, a Central part and an Eastern part. The Western part consists of Baden, Wurttemberg and Bavaria while the Central part consists of the area which currently is again called “Mitteleuropa”, Central Europe, namely the former Dual Monarchy of the Austrian-Hungarian Habsburg Empire and therefore Austria, Slovakia, Hungary and Croatia as well as parts of Romania.

While these two major areas—the Western and the Central Danube—are marked by the “West”, the “Occident”—let me say “the Abendland”—and that means in historico-cultural terms Catholic, Protestant and, most importantly, by European enlightenment, to this day we cross a clear cultural—and mental—barrier when we enter the South Eastern Danube area with its Eastern Christian Orthodox countries

of Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria which, culturally, are stamped by Byzantium: an inner European cultural West-East-border, which may be politically correct to ignore nowadays, but which nevertheless still seems to be virulent.

### **“CHESSBOARD OF THE GREAT POWERS”**

With regard to a political view, more exactly a geopolitical view, the entire Central and South Eastern Europe has served (and continues to serve) as the proverbial “chessboard for the diplomacy of the great powers” since the 17<sup>th</sup> century: Our region was part of the “Great Game” between the super-powers, a sphere of changing influence among the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Imperium, completed since the later 19<sup>th</sup> century by the impacts of Germany and Italy.

Probably no other European region fits as well as the Danube and Balkan areas the Machiavellian principle: Divide et Impera! The unique variety of cultural groups, religions, languages and mentalities along the river has facilitated the influx of powers from outside. According to a common bonmot by Karl Kraus (1874–1936) there are 20 languages, five religious denominations and three alphabets living together here. To name the particular languages—Germanic, Slavic, Romanic, Ugric, Turkish, Roma ones—would be beyond our scope.

The denominations are in short Catholic, Protestant (Lutheran and Calvinist), Orthodox (Greek, Slavic, Eastern Catholic), Muslim, and Jewish (Ashkenazi, Sephardic), the three alphabets are the Latin, the Cyrillic and the Ottoman-Turkish, which until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was still written in Arabic letters.

So we have to go far back into history to be able to comprehend the specific cultural, ethnic and religious shaping of the Danubian multiracial area. First came the division of the Late Roman Empire in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, which ran straight North-South through the Danube area, second, the following schism of Christianity into the Latin-Roman Western Church and the Byzantine-Orthodox Eastern Church, the still existing Schisma of 1074, and then, third, the penetration of Islam in early modern times. These are the three critical phases of this historical development, forming the specific cultural background of our area.

Subsequently, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century this region has been influenced by the National Romantic Idea originating from Germany, from Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). By that, in addition to the existing denominational and language borders, the Danube area was furthermore divided—even chopped up by nation-state-borders, a course of events

which at present has by no means come to an end: we only have to think of the recent nation-building in Bosna i Hercegovina, Crna Gora (Montenegro) and Kosovo/Kosova.

Thus, a real world of small states with a considerable potential for internal and international conflict has developed. Another painful realisation in this context is the fact that for the longest periods of history this multiethnic and multicultural mixture has not been a picturesque convivium or cooperation, but a juxtaposition—living not together but separated in their own spaces—, a position imposed and manipulated from above by the influence of the great powers. As we lately experienced in Yugoslavia, this mixture or melange could and still can very quickly turn into a violent conflict and “ethnic cleansing”.

The Romans, the Byzantine, the Ottomans, the Habsburgs and finally the Soviets have all functioned as regulatory powers at the Danube and they have all left their mental and material traces. The West as represented by the EU and NATO currently tries to bring about a pacification by economic support as well as military intervention.

It can only be speculated whether those centuries’ old international matters of dispute and minority conflicts which have been passed on from generation to generation can really ever be solved. The inclusion of the Central and South Eastern region into European unification is one of the great political challenges of the 21st century.

### **THE “FIVE-PART” DANUBE**

At present we see a five-part Danube region, five parts which reflect a significant economic and social gradient, a decline running from West down into East. And literally downstream from West to East. The first part comprises the old members of the EU and also members of the Euro-Zone, Germany and Austria, ranking among the most developed prosperous and modern countries worldwide. This is, so to speak, the First World on the Danube’s banks.

The second part consists of the younger members of the EU along the river, Hungary and Slovakia. These two countries represent the so-called emergent countries (“Schwellenländer”), standing on the threshold of transition from an agrarian society to an industrial one. These form the Second World of the Danube region. It is interesting to see that this “Second World” covers the core of the area called “Mitteleuropa” in former times—a rather theoretical, not to say ideological terminus, today mostly replaced by the term, “Central Europe”.

The third division, the third part comprises more recent members of the EU, Rumania and Bulgaria—EU states already, but also heavily criticised for not fulfilling the simplest European standards of the *acquis communautaire*. These countries represent the “Third World” of the Danube.

Let us now look to the fourth part: those aspirants or candidates with realistic chances for inclusion into EU: There is first of all Croatia, the most recent Candidate of 2011. Croatia is most similar to the “Second World”, Hungary and Slovakia, and also forms part of bygone “Middle Europe”. Serbia might become the next aspirant. Serbia’s situation tends more towards the so-called Danube’s Third World, Romania and Bulgaria. Differences notwithstanding, these two former Yugoslavian states Croatia and Serbia represent the “Fourth World” on the Danube.

And finally, we move in sight of the non-members of the EU along the stream: Moldavia and Ukraine, ironically, a dwarf-state (Moldavia) and a giant-state (Ukraine) regarding area and number of inhabitants. These two countries are without any real or even long-term perspective of joining the EU. Both are members of the SNG, the Russian-led “Commonwealth of Independent States” (in German: GUS). And both are moving along the edge of the poverty-line. Moldavia is regarded in the press and the media as “the poorhouse of Europe”. These Non-EU members might be called the “Fifth World” and, sorry to say, the Last World of the Danube area.

And so we are bound to recognize still an economically and socially interrupted line of “Five Parts” along the river, ranging from the Western countries via the Central and Southeastern lands down to the “Far East”. It is impossible not to notice this downstream line along the river marked by a strong downward movement in wealth, social security, income as well as in ecology. You may follow this social river-line here from Vienna, moving slightly downwards to Bratislava and Budapest, but then in a visible bend to Beograd and then passing the Iron Gates in a sharp bend down to Bucharest and Ruse and from there with an even sharper drop to Cisinaiu, to Reni and Izmailia.

We know that the Danube region as a whole has never formed any Unity or uniform space during its long history, be it ethnically, confessionally, nationally or otherwise. Maybe the destruction or softening of old borderlines along the Danube and in the Balkan region will serve to reduce the risk of violence and war such as that experienced in Yugoslavia in the first part of the 1990s.

Drastic diagnostic mistakes as made by the West and the EU at the eve of destruction of Yugoslavia in 1991 and based upon mis- or non-interpretation of factors

such as nationalism, separatism and anti-urbanism or the return to a glorious yet fictitious past must not be allowed to be repeated.

### **PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE**

My historical Danube synthesis which accentuates the Danube region as a region of historical crises and tension, as a heterogenous object and not an independent subject of the historical process might leave a certain feeling of anxiety in every one of us as concerns future development. A historian should, however, take care not to deduce a quasi-historical regularity for the future from the course of history.

The general conditions for cooperation to replace confrontation are in fact not bad. As regards the Danube, the signs of cooperation are increasing. After concrete and successful negotiations the Czech Republic and Hungary joined the EU followed by the Danube states of Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. Croatia has at last been offered membership. Mutual international negotiations of the Danube states such as those between Hungary and Romania have led to initial contractual results. At long last, Slovakian-Hungarian dialogue should hopefully lead to equally satisfactory results—although the West should not surrender to considerable illusions, as such international compromises of the Danube countries have not so much developed from the countries' own initiatives, but rather under the aegis if not to say the pressure of the EU.

Nevertheless, the Danube countries have been cooperating more and more, not least due to inter-disciplinary international conferences which equally consider history, politics, arts and culture, such as IDM's annual Summer Schools on Regional Co-operation here in Vienna. I am glad to participate in this conference and would like to cordially thank the initiators.

As a concluding remark, I would like to quote the central statement of the Danube Charter, as it was programmatically worded in the Council of Europe in Strassbourg in 1956: "Water does not know state borders. It demands international co-operation!"

