
CONSTRUCTION OF A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DESTINATION: THE DANUBE REGION

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INTRODUCTION

The Danube River Basin is characterized by diverse development perspectives, especially in the new framework of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR). Tourism and culture are two important pillars of this strategy and can contribute significantly to economic growth in the region. The attractiveness of the Danube region as a tourist destination is given by cultural heritages as well as attractive landscapes. One of the most important criteria for the development of tourism should be sustainability.

This paper aims to give an overview of integrated interests, projects and activities in the area of tourism and sustainable regional development with a focus on the Middle and Lower Danube region. A special emphasis will be put on the Danube Delta, the largest and most sensitive wetland in Europe, which is now subject to considerable efforts in conservation and protection. Furthermore, the paper intends to explore the opportunities and challenges of the EUSDR with regard to tourism and to provide some suggestions of key elements of a Danube tourism identity in order to promote it as a European tourism destination.

THE DANUBE MACRO REGION – NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR TOURISM

More than ever before, Europe is facing a new “territorial reconfiguration” especially through the European Union integration mechanisms: borderless economic, social and environmental challenges which require joint policies. Third countries are equally involved through different programmes such as INTERREG. These new cooperation territories are increasingly associated with the term “macro region”, the most recent experiments being the Baltic Sea Strategy released in 2009, followed very closely by the Danube River Strategy in 2010.

The political framework for tourism in the EU has changed with the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty. Tourism is a very important economic sector and the Lisbon Treaty has created a new competency to support it. This was the first official recognition of the crucial role that tourism plays for the European Union's economy, with a contribution of more than 5 % to the EU GDP (European Commission, 2011). According to Mercedes Bresso, President of the Committee of the Regions, this support should include a more integrated approach to tourism (The Parliament, 2010). Article 3 of the Lisbon Treaty improves the EU's ability to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among Member States. Tourism is an economic activity which can reinforce territorial cohesion.

One of the four main objectives of the new tourism policy of the European Commission regards the promotion of sustainable and responsible development and high quality tourism. Sustainable destination management is critical for tourism development, especially through effective spatial and land use planning and development control and through investment decisions on infrastructure and services. It requires the involvement of all regional and local stakeholders and an efficient structure within which partnership and effective leadership are facilitated (European Commission, 2007).

In this context, it is entirely in concordance with the EU's agenda for a sustainable and competitive European tourism development that tourism is one of the priorities for the EUSDR. Sustainable tourism development in the entire Danube region is a must and should integrate the experiences of the Western European countries on the upper Danube regarding the importance of a good balance between tourism, environment protection and economic growth. Tourism actions in the Danube region depend particularly on the EU tourism policy. Among the fourteen countries in the Danube Basin which are the concern of the EUSDR, eight are EU member states while some other countries are (possible) candidates. More than 100 million people living in the Danube region have expectations from this new "Danube macro region" territory and the opportunities that it can open in the future. The priority tourism for the Danube Region is to develop tourism and capitalise on its natural, cultural and historical heritage by strengthening the specific infrastructure and implementing intensive promotion activities (European Commission, 2010:27).

The present study aims to investigate tourism development and cooperation aspects in the Middle and Lower Danube, related to different levels of development.

Unlike Germany and Austria, which are among the richest and most developed countries of the EU, the GDP per capita of many of the other Danubian countries is below the EU average. The question is how the countries of the Middle and Lower Danube will be able to enhance the development of the Danube region.

In this respect, tourism development is a great opportunity to promote cross-border cooperation between states, regions and communities and can thereby be an important tool for the integration of countries from south-eastern Europe into the EU. Tourism can help in spreading a positive image of the “Blue Danube” to South-Eastern Europe as a whole. It also helps in establishing tourism products on a sustainable basis, focusing for example on nature, rural areas, viticulture, cycling, river tours and cruises (GTZ, 2005).

It can thus be concluded that cooperation is a central requirement for sustainable planning and the development of destinations (Bramwell & Lane, 2000). An important role in the application of the tourism policy for the Danube region could be taken over by existing actors and networks that are based on cooperation, such as the Danube Tourist Commission, the Danube Competence Center, DATOUR Way project etc.

MIDDLE AND LOWER DANUBE

The Danube is the second longest river of Europe after the Volga, and the only one crossing Europe from west to east. The similarities between the Upper and Lower part are given by the natural potential and the differences are given by the level of development. While cultural and urban tourism potential exists all along the Danube, the number of tourists visiting Vienna or Budapest cannot be compared with those visiting Belgrade, for example.

The Middle and Lower sector of the Danube correspond to Central and South-Eastern Europe, which is economically less developed and therefore has an almost non-existent tourism image and visibility. The common aspect of many of the countries from this part of Europe is the fact that they share the same kind of challenges regarding environment protection, lack of infrastructure, poor development of tourism or lack of qualified personnel working in the tourist industry.

Moreover, the situation of tourism in these countries is strongly related to their recent history after the 1990s, characterized by important social, economic and political changes. Many Danube countries faced important challenges related to the affirmation of their national identity. Some of them, such as Croatia, took tourism into

consideration in defining this identity; others just ignored it, as for example Romania where tourism was strongly affected by political instability (Hall et al., 2006).

The last two decades were crucial in the creation of competitiveness in tourism and reinvention of national brands. Unfortunately, not all were success stories and modest economical performances in the tourist industry were registered. The main causes were the funds lacking for investment in the development, modernization, and rehabilitation of specific infrastructures, little diversification of entertainment or the quality of tourism services (Tigu et al., 2010).

That notwithstanding, Central and South Eastern Europe can offer a number of tourist attractions along the Danube River. Starting in Serbia, two big cities, Novi Sad and Belgrade are bastions of culture and civilization. Numerous relics of ancient civilizations and the Roman Empire, medieval fortresses, Baroque churches and monasteries as well as attractive landscapes and national parks such as the Iron Gates and the Danube Delta offer a broad range of interesting tourist destinations.

The development of tourism along the Middle and Lower Danube therefore highly depends on internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) but also on external factors (opportunities and threats). The following SWOT analysis will give a short overview of key elements:

Strengths

- New and undiscovered area
- Diversity of attractions in the region
- Numerous cultural and natural elements

Weaknesses

- No homogenous destination
- No clear image of the Danube region
- Illegal development (especially in the protected areas)
- Poor infrastructure (accommodation, accessibility, lack of sewage and water treatment systems)
- Pollution (domestic, industrial)
- Poor cooperation in cross border areas
- Insufficient tourism promotion
- Low competitiveness in tourism offers

Opportunities

- Green tourism
- River cruise tourism
- Expansion of cross-border cooperation programs
- Demand for “new” products and attractions
- Possibility to benefit from the larger experience of the western Danube countries
- Support from the EU
- Media interest

Threats

- Potential conflicts between different organizations
- Potential political and/or economic problems
- Potential ecological problems
- Decline of traditional activities
- Climate change

As can be seen, the lower part of the Danube region has a lot to offer and moreover represents a new attraction for seasoned travellers, for example German tourists. Nevertheless, the same category of tourists has usually high expectations regarding the quality of tourism services which—with few exceptions—have to be improved. The same type of problem exists regarding the infrastructure: either it is missing, or it has not been modernised for many years and is not corresponding anymore with today’s demands.

Fortunately, in the framework of the EUSDR things are likely to change. There is a great European interest in this region and the stakeholders should take advantage of this. Even though it is clearly mentioned in the strategy that there will be no specific financial allocation, there are many cross-border cooperation programmes that can be made use of.

Even so, there are a number of hazards that could jeopardize the development of this region. Many countries are not sufficiently prepared to maintain the ecological integrity of the Danube and even less to cope with possible ecological disasters. Regarding the situation from a political point of view, there is a threat that sustainability as a concept is not well understood and applied and that governments will push for the development for immediate benefits and growth without taking into

consideration sustainable development measures. Other serious menaces are the lack of funds, corruption and the non-involvement of stakeholders.

FIRST STEPS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY:

THE EXAMPLE OF THE DANUBE DELTA

Romania and Ukraine share one of the most threatened ecosystems in Europe: the Danube Delta. Recognised internationally since the 1990s as a UNESCO natural world heritage site, as a wetland of international importance (the Ramsar Convention) and as a Biosphere Reserve within the UNESCO Program “Man and the Biosphere”, the Danube Delta is facing many challenges today (DDBRA, 2011). The main threats are related to different economic activities; fishing, hunting, livestock and subsistence farming, reed harvesting as well as tourism.

The Danube Delta has great importance as an area of biodiversity: it hosts more than 5,300 types of plants and animal species and 30 different types of ecosystems, 23 of which are natural and 7 that are man-made. However, the Danube Delta remains famous particularly for its bird populations. More than 330 species live here, the most well-known being the white pelican, the Dalmatian pelican, the pygmy cormorant and the white-tailed eagle. But the Danube Delta is not only a nesting place, but also a resting place for millions of birds during their migration. Besides its high biodiversity value, the Danube Delta is also home to 17 different ethnic communities living here in peaceful coexistence, providing a somewhat exotic atmosphere of cultures and traditions. The biggest groups are Romanians, Ukrainians, Turks, Greeks, Tatars, Russians and Lipovens. During communism, the Danube Delta was extensively exploited and converted into farmland. As a result, the natural ecosystem has suffered serious degradation and high losses of biodiversity. The creation of the transboundary biosphere reserve increased hope that shared socio-economic problems would be solved and, at the same time, help to maintain the delta's ecological balance and biodiversity. Today, 20 years after the creation of the reserve, many changes have occurred but not necessarily for the better. Many initiatives for the conservation of natural resources have been undertaken with more or less success, but the economic situation of the people living in the Danube Delta has not improved. On the contrary, the region is facing great economic problems. The tourism sector, which could represent the economical pillar of the Danube Delta area, lacks coordinated action and is characterized by poor skills and lack of a qualified workforce.

Map 1: Danube Delta Map

Source: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DeltaRBDD.jpg>

The immense value of the delta has also been recognised by Naturefriends International (NFI) and its members, which proclaimed the Danube Delta “Landscape of the Year 2007–2009” in Europe. Through this Landscape of the Year model, NFI accompanies the chosen region on the road to a better future, mounting activities, offering advice on professional tourism and regional development and fostering media and public relations (NFI, 2009).

The outcome of the project focused mainly on:

- Tourism: Europe-wide promotion, improvement of quality, capacity building and job creation
- Reeds: traditional reed architecture / new products—in order to revitalize reed cultivation, cooperation has been established with the National Park “Neusiedler See” in Austria in order to exchange knowledge and experience on new products made out of reed
- Environmental education: waste and energy efficiency
- Culture & others: fish & art festival

The “Danube Delta Landscape of the year 2007–2009” initiative of Naturefriends International was the framework and the starting point for launching discussions

about the future of the tourism in the Danube Delta. Much has been achieved during this time, but it turned out that some initiatives, such as the planned cross-border cooperation with Ukraine (NFI, 2009), required more time for implementation,. Tensions at the political level and the fact that Romania joined the EU in 2007 were factors which made cross border cooperation and communication more difficult, this aspect also being reflected in the Danube Delta.

In December 2010 the “Quality improvement for cross-border tourism in the Danube Delta (Romania, Moldova and Ukraine)” project was launched by the Danube Competence Center (DCC), with NFI as project manager.

The Danube Competence Center, established in 2010 in Belgrade, Serbia is one of the first organizations which focuses its activities on the middle and lower sectors of the Danube, due to its great economic potential for tourism. The goal is to encourage joint performance by stakeholders who could, through coordinated development projects and activities in European institutions, contribute to a much faster development of the Danube community which could become more competitive in the tourist industry compared to the more developed countries of the Upper Danube Region (DCC, 2011).

The DCC’s commitment was recently affirmed by the organisation of a floating conference on the Danube within the framework of “Blue week”, celebrated for Danube Day on 29th June. Besides some productive discussions, one of the main outcomes of this conference was the signing of the “Declaration of the Danube Floating Conference” by ministers and heads of delegations from Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia. They agreed to develop and foster closer cooperation in order to position the Danube area as a tourist destination, to ensure common tourism promotion, to encourage and stimulate initiatives from private and public stakeholders of the Middle and Lower Danube area, etc. The “Danube Floating Conference” and “Blue Week” represent the first steps in materializing a vision of how the Middle and Lower Danube could be one day: a region with diverse tourist attractions, accommodation facilities of all categories, a developed infrastructure, a wide network of bicycle paths and developed water sports, a region that everyone would want to visit and discover its unspoiled nature and cultural and historical landmarks (DCC, 2011).

It can be concluded that there is a great need for these kinds of sustainable tourism projects and in particular, for cross border projects that can help to improve the ability of the local people in international cooperation.

THE UPPER AND LOWER DANUBE – CONVERGENCE INTO ONE EUROPEAN TOURISM DESTINATION

Up to now, the Danube has always been managed with a sector approach, either from the point of view of resources or of interests. Although Danube countries are at different levels of development, the EU neglected for many years the potential of this macro region as a whole. The region lacks the tools and solutions to balance the development of this undertaking. The European Union should take advantage of the possible positive impact of cooperation between the western and eastern Danube countries. This is the context in which the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region made its appearance.

The EU territorial cooperation mechanisms and the development of the macro regional concept focused on territorial cooperation offered an opportunity for transformation of the existing Danube region into a more specific, concrete and comprehensive cooperation framework (Busek & Gjoreska, 2010).

Regarding the tourist sector, the countries should realize this great opportunity to create together a new tourism offer on the European market. On the one hand, the western countries of the Upper Danube—Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary, need to expand and improve what they already offer in terms of tourism along the river (cycling paths, cruises etc). On the other side, the success of these existing projects and products can be definitely assured and increased if they are continued along the Middle and Lower Danube. For example, the Danube Bicycle Route coming from Germany through Austria and into Hungary has started to be continued in some parts in Serbia and the plan is to continue all along the Danube to the delta.

Other “material” tourism cohesion items also mentioned in the EC Communication announcing the EUSDR are the development of river cruises and hiking routes. Moreover, people can be attracted to the region by cultural events, and the promotion of a calendar of Danube tourism/cultural events could be another element in constructing the Danube brand.

Lately, the European Commission has been encouraging trans-national thematic tourism products such as cultural heritage itineraries, cycling routes, greenways, protected natural sites etc. In this respect, the Danube is one of the best examples of European trans-national destinations suitable for this type of project, but its implementation is put under the condition of cooperation among a number of partners.

It is evident that cooperation is a key to future development. Fierce competition between different countries along the Danube might possibly have some immediate advantages but in the long run without a common strategy the region will not have any chance to compete with others similar regions, for example the Baltic Sea. However, the development of tourism in the Danube region depends on a number of developments in associated sectors:

- new infrastructure as well as harmonisation of the existing infrastructure
- improvement of the environmental conditions of the Danube
- development of a modern system for education and training in the field of tourism all along the Danube
- development of territorial cooperation mainly between the countries in the Middle and Lower Danube region

Within the framework of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, this river valley, throughout history the object of controversies, today has a chance to construct a fresh identity, and tourism and culture can contribute to this process.

OUTLOOK AND CONCLUSIONS

The most recent European challenges in territorial cooperation are the two established macro regions: the Baltic and the Danube region. Both of these are long-term strategies and we are now witnessing the beginning of this long race.

At this point it is still difficult to speak of the Danube as an entity. In order for the EUSDR to be successful there is a need for concrete and visible action to overcome the challenges that the region is facing. One of the easiest ways to start building the Danube valley identity is through tourism and culture. The projects should focus first on the Middle and Lower Danube because these countries have a stronger need in obtaining acceptable standards regarding infrastructure and service quality. Romania and Bulgaria, which are leading the tourism priority of the Danube strategy, should work together with others in order to stimulate new projects. In the very best situation there should be more private and public cooperation.

The first steps towards sustainability of action on the Middle and Lower Danube were taken in the Danube Delta. Due to its value, it becomes imperative that measures should be taken in order to preserve this European biodiversity hot spot. The organisation of workshops and trainings for the local population with regard to the

sustainable way of making use of the accommodations, or in nature guiding, were successful due to the intervention of Naturefriends International, but this type of measure should be continually applied. However, this will represent an incentive for further activity initiated by private and/or local stakeholders.

Meanwhile, the Danube River and its cultural and natural heritage should be promoted as one entity at international travel fairs and in tourist brochures. The construction of a tourism destination is a long and complex process which in this case should be “*rather based on geographical commonalties than on dividing nationalities*” (DCC, 2011). Also, besides the common promotional policy, development of joint touristic products will definitely contribute to exploiting the Danube’s tourism potential. In economic terms, this will mean the creation of new jobs and will bring income to the countries.

Would it be possible one day for a tourist to say that he is going to visit the Danube region? More than ever this is a real perspective. Still, there is a great need for joint activities of all involved actors on many different levels.

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