

European Construction and Political Science

The Integrative Role of Danube River in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract: Source of life and welfare, the Danube River is fundamental for eastern and central European countries, and marked the history of all its cultures and civilizations. The aim of this article is to present its social, cultural, economic role and the essential and fundamental valor of biodiversity. The approach proposed in this paper is based on the recognition of the multinational and multicultural particularities in the Danube area and is focused on the analysis and the importance of the local cultural synergy. We use the pragmatic interdisciplinary paradigm and our academic observation would be impartial, objective and ethical.

1. Introduction

The water, the key element for the success of all known life forms, covers over 70% of the surface of the Earth, but only 3% is soft water, compatible with the metabolism of the human beings.

From this quantity, the rivers, occupy the lower part of the hydrologic compartment, about 2000 cubic kilometers, but due to the terrestrial basin connected with the atmosphere, the oceans and the seas are considered by many as the true kidneys of Earth.

If from geologically the point of view they transported much of the sediment components of continental plates, their unidirectional characteristic facilitated the communication between different civilizations, thereby creating a sustainable multicultural mosaic. Many cities and states sometimes have organized along main water courses, cohabiting to exploit appropriately the benefits offered freely by the river ecosystems.

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In Europe there are five big rivers generators of traditions and edifying border integration: Volga, Danube, Rhine, Seine and Thames.

The Danube River is of vital importance for the European humanity, and its historical- cultural and geographical role was definitively established by the millenary cohabitation along its course of hundreds of millions of people.

Having its origins in the mountains of the Black Forest in Germany, Danube passes through more than 2800 kilometers to the Black Sea, where its mouth forms the Danube Delta, a unique biodiversity ecosystem and of ecological importance.

With so many navigable tributaries (over 1/5 of total) Danube is an important transport route for Central and Eastern Europe even if its traffic is lower than that made on Rhine. Explanations can be found in lower population density, which, however, is very cosmopolitan, especially from the linguistic, social and economic point of view. It is desirable that the common denominator of the European Union establishes a regional collaboration as the potential of the region, impartial and on a long term.

The main countries that the river runs through are the following, from west to east: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Throughout this article we will not focus on the physical characteristics of the Cluster Danube, we will try to make a series of recommendations necessary to increase the degree of synchrony in this region emphasizing the geographical proximity of the Danube cluster, the regional political economic dimension and the integral role of education in the Danube region.

2. Geographical Proximity of the Danube Cluster

Danube in Central and Easter Europe meant, for millenniums, the main factor that influenced the international commercial trades. The lower the distance in kilometers or in time was between partners, the more increased the dynamic of the commercial interaction was. The distance was seen also in this region as a concept that separated the regions and the countries, generating higher costs in the international transactions, and these barriers not only explained the volume of trades between countries, but also helped to explain the absence of the commerce between many countries.

The geographical economy of the Danubian region recently progressed due to the openness of the intercultural concepts, combining economy, social sciences and the humanistic ones. (Ettliger, 2003, p. 166)

The geographical proximity is influenced heavily by the contingent between the two regions, the physical distance and the perceived psychological distance being

considered to be two significant sub factors (e.g. connections between Germany and Austria, Romania and Republic of Moldova). The sub factor of the physical distance occurs due to the fact that, in the process of internationalization, many of the European companies prefer markets as close as possible, at least in the early stages of business expansion as they consider that, due to the proximity, they can somehow influence the balance of the risk factor. The concept of psychical distance is one of the key factors for the expansion of any business partnership, being perceived as the degree of similarity or difference between the original market and those that will be active - there are perceived differences in language, management practice, economic growth, internal market infrastructure, etc. (Hortacsu & Tektasi, 2009)

The geographical proximity has a significant role in the regional economy, lately even a new science appeared - *the economical geography*, which by its new traditions explores the micro-foundations of a heterogeneous space. In this Danubian heterogeneous space the productivity of companies is affected, having to meet the challenge of investing abroad or bringing their subsidiaries in the country (Beugelsdijk, et alli, 2010, p. 488). This seems to contradict the statements supporting the disappearance of the importance of proximity in economy once the information and communication technology developed, therefore, Danube will still be the main unifying artery.

However the current economic and financial crisis is an important part of the future story also for the ten Danubian countries. Firstly because, without a doubt, the crisis was facilitated by the end of world geography, through its quick, smooth and no turbulences course of finance along all borders. Secondly, the firmness of the crisis may be an important determinant for the next geography finances as the regularization reactions can or cannot follow the extreme credit crisis, so that we can continue to manage the worldwide network of accessible information. (O' Brien & Keith, 2009, p. 246)

Recently, the *organizational proximity* (through the mix companies that appear more often in the region) is used with the *geographical proximity* (Dankbaar 2007; Knobens & Oerlemans 2006; Torre & Rallet 2005, apud Cristoffersen & Jakobsen, 2010), the two concepts replacing each other more often in relation to the temporary geographic proximity, facilitating the development of the informal development in this cluster.

Spatiality remains the most important factor explaining the constant commercial trades from Germany to Ukraine and Romania, where we can add the cultural, mental or historical similarities.

For the cluster of the Danubian countries we cannot speak of tangible and intangible barriers because, "Tangible barriers are directly observable in quantitative terms on trade. The examples are the transport barriers and transport

policies (tariffs, import - export quotas). Secondly we can identify trade intangible barriers that cannot be observed and measured directly in monetary quantity terms. Intangible barriers of trade include: informational barriers, cultural and institutional barriers between countries.” (Linders, et alli 2008, p. 444)

In the development of economic exchanges we consider as being very important the following aspect: the potential market of a country depends, therefore, on several factors: the access to large, dynamic and protectionist markets (the EU or Russia case) but also on the degree of cultural-economic proximity to other areas. If there would be no motivation for an approach between countries or companies it is likely that the volume of trade would diminish due to distance, customs’ fees, present ideologies, etc. An increase of 1%, according to Villarubia J.M., of the distance between the two countries or regions would produce a drop in the bilateral trade by about 1.3%, while a common border or an agreement to this effect would increase the trade volume by approximately 40% (2006, p. 197).

It can be argued that geography has visible consequences on the economic development of each Danubian country, increasing or not the potential of economic exchanges. The access to a larger market or to a more dynamic one, allows better recovery of exports culminating in increasing the capital accumulation.

3. The Regional Political Economic Dimension

In every community there are unavoidable tensions and each individual reserve their own freedom in selecting ways of solving problems. Everyone is facing the following dilemma - the need to integrate in a community that provides protection versus the fear of losing control over their own destiny for the group.

States in this part of the European continent are also affected by these cultural realities trying, in different ways, to exercise their autonomy and, as much as possible, their authority in the area where they activate. Every political system is rooted in the cultural specificity of their society and the way the national institutions (educational system, the legal system) are motivated contributes to legitimizing the internal credibility. The political culture influences the specific forms of the institutions.

Therefore, the political culture is, with all the unifying role of the Danube, a set of norms and values that a society developed to cope with tensions and reduce the fundamental threats. Even for the nation states that proclaim their diversity there is a national political culture. (Chevrier, 2009, p. 172)

The economic proximity assumes an increase of the size of a market and referring to the past, we mention A. Smith, who, since the XVIIIth century, has realized that

a larger commercial market allows a more efficient specialization, a division of labor, with direct consequences on the increase of productivity and efficiency.

Especially the Danubian economic circuits developed lately, both on the river and tributaries, with strong national and international influences. In the process of economic expansion, a series of factors of the new trans-Danubian environment are followed: the GDP, the global competitiveness (country's rank), country risk, market attractiveness, market saturation, time pressure, etc.

The economic proximity can be measured especially by the GDP differences level, unfortunately quite differently between the ten countries, which is the main variable to be considered when entering into a new regional market.

Due to the importance of the economic proximity, the growth differences between different states are still so important and persistent, and the potential development of a market depends on how it manages to establish a link of synergy with other Danubian markets, larger and more dynamic. The aim is the sustainable development for all countries, so that this concept has connotations that relate also to the ethical proximity as: "the sustainable development makes sense only for the whole economic system, not even to the national economic system, it cannot be the boundary of this concept, because under the conditions of increasing the openness of the national economies and, especially, in terms of regional economic integration, the national system becomes a simple element in the global activity network". (Dinga, 2009, p. 41)

We see a significance of economic political proximity especially in special circumstances, the occurrence of some moments of crisis, or when the demand for a country's exports cannot be honored for all interested. In this case the gain can return to countries in the neighborhood, but especially to those that afford the highest purchasing price or to those involved in strategic political partnerships (hence the need to develop a cluster based on the Danube countries due to the huge integrating factor provided by the river).

We argue the above statement as the countries that converge to the same goals and have approximately similar political-economic strategies tend to become associate, creating new forms of association, some of them (the European Union, Mercosur) having permanent legal authorities, the involved countries giving them increased authority.

Another important component of the economic and political association represents the exchange of technology; it is known that the most advanced technology circuit is affected by the financial strength of the applicant, or by the strategic partnership interest. With the exchange of technology (in this case, shipping, fisheries, education) in sectors where there is no type of internal production, new companies (foreign or national investments) may arise, and where there is a certain level of required production possibilities of fusion or absorption appear.

An important aspect of economic and political proximity is the international inequalities, but also the interregional ones. Here it interferes the policy of the ten Danubian countries: “the state plays a key role by it providing an environment in which markets can flourish and eliminate the excesses that arise when markets enjoy complete freedom ... the prosperity of a modern economy depends on finding the right balance and on the division of responsibilities between markets and state.” (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2000, p.43).

4. The Integral Role of Education in the Danube Region

Education is a futuristic action of the people, its activity area is always the future, for the success of any modern educational process it is planned in the most systematic ways that relate to the modern educational performances. “An authentic education must lead to the performance of our faculties to permanently assess what we do and what we know”. (Cucos, 2008, p. 18)

The new society based on knowledge (*Knowledge society*) focuses especially on the performances obtained by the managerial science development; this form of applied knowledge can influence the social economic realities and it leads to the appearance of a new concept in the modern educational system- *knowledge management* that, through its new applications and strategies can order and optimize all the processes of an organization, (Taranu, 2009, p. 18) and this case can offer the most competent solutions for an integration of pan-Danubian values and interests.

It can be said that the finalities of education should not be along the Danube river “a simple amount or a homogenous collection of separate goals, but they form a systematized totality where the elements are correlated by subordination and superordination relations between the different levels (ideals, goals, objectives) and through the interdependence relations between different domains or categories (intellectual, moral, esthetic, cognitive, affective, psychomotor, etc.)” (Burja et al., 2006, p. 13)

The academic research, through the interest given to science and innovation, made of universities the key partners in the process of economic development; the universities, through the interaction with the social economic agents, assume a catalytic role in the process of regional economy development. (Fotea, 2011, p. 71)

Regarding the technologic education at the level of Danubian cooperation, Cojocaru (2011) considers that the dissemination of knowledge can be facilitated by creating interdependent specialists who can work with the diversity of views, given that, of course, the developed countries will continue to support the development of research activity, so that the global technology stock would develop.

Also, the contemporary education should focus on the principle of the new, to have a specific logical significance to the age of the addressee, the meaning appearing only when the new knowledge integrates into the structure of the educational process beneficiary. (Cocorada, 2010)

The research and technological development activity of the European Union enjoyed by all countries of the Danubian Cluster, members or not, aims at improving and increasing the European industrial competitiveness, improving the quality of life and the constant support in promoting the other communitarian policies. (Nastase & Popescu, 2011, p. 122)

The education in the European Union, through its strategies, made as a part of the educational problems to move from national to supranational level, thus creating a harmonization of the educational policy between the member states, a very useful factor to consolidate the connections in the region. The *acquis communautaire* which refers to professional education and youth has a profound intercultural feature as it aims at, besides disseminating the foreign languages of the states and favoring students' mobility, a better development of the exchange of information and experience in this field. A successful cooperation in the field of education in the Danube region, which respects the cultural and linguistic diversities, should be based on the European programs and their role defined ever since the early actions of collaboration.

For Romania, its inclusion in the European Union required a change of vision given that the phenomenon it was created the transition phenomenon from the socio-economic Eastern European specific to the countries of Western Europe, whose tradition is part of the international business context. The challenge comes in the way you can change the Romania's national business strategy in order to approach the international business standards, thus the Romanian cultural frame becoming compatible to the international environment. Perhaps the local business environment will be able to score a better performance in the international network only if it will enhance the cross-border cooperation by reducing the excessive bureaucracy, facilitating some explanatory procedures, so that the global perspectives can be successfully incorporated at local level.

Lately, the Romanian universities registered important improvements by reviewing the curricula, improving the students' performances, management and administration decentralization, access to the online information, all this being necessary to align the Romanian educational standards to the European demands. The economic changes had a strong impact among the universities in Romania by decreasing the number of students that did not afford to pay their fees. The only positive aspect appeared for some institutions when the number of foreign students grew as they could not pay the tuition in their home countries. (Alexa et al., p. 824)

The evolution of the educational system in Romania in the intercultural context was influenced, in the last two decades, by the social economic changes in the East Europe, and the adherence to the European Union has integrated the national system into the European model implemented by the Bologna Process.

Through the educational package that it offers, and in this case we refer to the Danubius University of Galati, we tried to adapt to the new requirement and obtaining a central role in the national hierarchy, achieving also partnerships with the civil society, and with the industrial and business environment as well. Traditionally, the Romanian academic criteria was conceived as being one of the top, the universities being represented according to the historical provinces, the admission in the higher education proving to be a very difficult process up to 1990 – being situations where 30 candidates were competing for one place. (Ianos et al., 2011, p. 86)

Even if most of the Romanian universities have assets compatible to the European requests, we consider that the main problem of the contemporary education is represented by the weak motivation of students due to the modest offer of the labor market, which has thus consequences on stimulating the skills.

Returning to the common interest, based on the performance criteria in the research field and number of innovations, the European Union and therefore some Danubian countries classify after the United States, that is why it is necessary to really impose the Lisbon Strategy, which promotes a “Europe of excellence”.

The interest given to High-Tech sector can accelerate the cross-border cooperation in the region as the exports of developed countries in this field represent 25% of the international commerce. (Albulescu et al., 2011), international performance often being synonym with the intellectual property obtained after a constant education. The human capital, the most important final asset of education, proves the innovator capacity of a country and it helps to the development of a synergetic relation at the level of international companies and institutions.

A competent educational system offers to people a vision characterized by initiative; each of us has to be responsible for their future, which deserves to be influenced by the ideals that we want and not by the external stimuli, regardless of their physical or psychological nature. The most important objective of education is the prioritization of the values that brings us closer to the solutions that we want. (Moldovan & Lung Moldovan, 2011) The synergic action that catalyzes the creative potential is also very important, offering an intellectual and emotional openness between the ten Danubian partners, to new possibilities and alternatives.

The way education is regarded and the system of values maintains can open new perspectives in the development of the collaboration system which is based mainly on the intellectual capital assessment.

5. Instead of Conclusions

In case of achieving a cultural, educational or interregional business proximity, the words of partners must have the same meaning, values and norms must be successfully identified right from the beginning of a possible Danubian statute. Each country in this region, in order to have credibility, must be ethical even since the moment of describing the objectives up to their implementation and final vision. Along the history there are known the situations when the immoral decisions were firstly the bad decisions, and the partners who lack honesty and are incompetent. The complexity of the Danubian collaboration results also from the fact that the reputation of the ten states is built also on the image that they manage to impose on the international market. The Danubian ethics, we believe that is up to the conscience of all partners, and, for its activation it matters a lot the influence exercised by the collective minds.

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