

# The Danube Region: transformation and emergence

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## Abstract

*The paper deals with the impact of concrete / tangible social transformation processes on the emergence and shaping of new concepts such as multi-dimensional identity. It also discusses the preconditions necessary for the emergence of such concepts as well as the reasons that may lead to their acceptance or rejection by the respective target groups. The topic is discussed on the concrete empirical evidence of the transformation and the emergence of the Danube Region as the third EU macro-region. It shows that transformation processes require careful coordination and transparency, especially when they address social spaces that do not conform to traditional boundaries and perceptions of reality. Education is considered to play a crucial role in the process of internalisation of such social realities and the redefinition of obsolete thinking patterns.*

**Key words:** Danube Region, transformation, identity, education, EU Regional Policy.

## 1. Introduction

The European project and the forging of a European identity has shown along the decades that on this continent there is a lot of space for diversity and alternative forms of association. The strengthening of the position of the regional and local actors, corroborated with their active participation in the shaping of the European policies and projects, has enabled many Europeans to show that being a European is a multi-dimensional concept that has different meanings for different people, and that it can represent the reconciliation of several various identities, rather than the selection of one single linear identity. Although unity in diversity is nothing new for Europeans, a tendency that shows ever more people diverging from a linear understanding of identity towards a

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multi-dimensional one, for which new spaces for association and belonging are provided, may definitely be a concept worthwhile analysing.

It is with one of these new European tendencies that this paper intends to deal with. How do alternative forms of association develop and what are their advantages? Do we participate in them inherently or do they need to be formally constructed, for us to be in position to register their existence and internalise them into our own value system? Are they a socially induced development or do they come from the bottom up and are then just recognised as valid interpretations of our social reality? And what are the forces in play in the emergence of these new identity spaces?

This paper will try to touch upon these and other similar questions through the example of the Danube Region and its recent official coming into being in the context of the European macro-regional strategies. The terms region and regional have occupied one of the most ambiguous and multifunctional roles within the context of the development of the European Union and its integration and cohesion policies. Depending on the context and their individual use, they could acquire a multitude of meanings. One could, among others, talk about sub-regions, Euro-regions, cross-border regions a/o, from administrative, cooperative, political and from many other points of view. However, in all these cases, and independently from the way in which they were defined, these terms served as generators of new communication and identity spaces that provided both the diversification and the enrichment of the European identity and the formalisation of grass-root tendencies.

Independently of the primary reasons that triggered their emergence, these new identity and interaction spaces provided suitable frameworks for dealing with issues that could not be addressed properly otherwise i.e. not by any of their constituent elements independently. Their main characteristic is given by their systemic properties, the specific needs and worries around which their constituent elements gather together and without which they could not possibly emerge. In other words, each such newly defined property of a region or regional space in a specific 'geographical' context only provides an opportunity for an alternative way of association and interaction, in ways that may not have been available for its constituent elements before, or for the formalisation of those spaces and their integration into the cognitive reality of their constituent elements.

The continuous competition between the existing models and spaces of association and interaction and the creation or the validation of new models and spaces for interaction has been widely discussed by many academic circles and disciplines, while it has been characterised by a transformation of the basic social relations and subsequently with the reorganisation and the redefining of the current models governing those social relations and affecting all aspects of society. A good basis for understanding how social changes come about and

how they are manifested in our daily lives, among others, is Pier Bourdieu's relational model, according to which all involved parties occupy specific roles and positions within a determined social space and the transformation of that space or the creation of new spaces depends on the value that the involved parties will attach to their own positions and the resources that are available to them (Bourdieu, 1998).

We perceive the concrete manifestations of this social transformation processes as enacted in concrete policy measures or tendencies. Macro-regions are the latest development of this sort in the European Union and like other previously established interaction spaces they offer at the moment the advantage of flexible definition and shaping, as well as of successful formal integration of all the, already existing, binding elements specific for these supplementary identity spaces, no matter whether these are elements of diversity or unity.

It is not the purpose of this paper to enter into a theoretical debate on social spaces or identity creation. What it will try to do is to bring to the forefront an overview of the main elements in play in the case of the Danube Region as well as of some of the obstacles and opportunities that need to be considered during the negotiations for the setting up of this new European macro-region and the elaboration of the EU Strategy for this region.

## **2. The Danube Region – Unity vs. Diversity**

The Danube Region is a phrase that has shown increased frequency of usage since June 2009 when the Council of the European Union decided to task the European Commission to elaborate an *EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)*. This represented a turning point because of the formal recognition of this area as an area with its own specific needs and connections within a EU context and as opposed to other similar EU macro-regions, such as the Baltic Sea Region and the Mediterranean Partnership, the forerunners of this new EU approach towards territorial cooperation.

In spite of the fact that the term as such has a long history in European and especially East European Affairs it has not been recognised so far in such a comprehensive and inclusive manner. It is a fact that the Danube Region has been there for centuries, dividing and uniting peoples. The Danube River has often been the limit and the border of great empires, but also one of the main trade routes, connecting east and west, north and south.

Historical developments left their marks on the states that constitute its core, and they conditioned in many ways the way in which the Region shaped and organised itself in the more recent history. Historical heritage and myths blended with the social realities of these countries through the centuries and underlined and determined transnational alliances at all levels, shaping future transnational preferences and interaction. They also determined to a great extent the image of a Danube Region based on oppositions rather than on similarities.

Internal and external disparities of the Region conditioned the integration capacities of some of its members and the manner in which they perceived their role and position within a unified Danube Region.

Naturally, a duality, a continuous competition between unity and diversity shaped itself, conditioned by internal as much as by external factors. Unity through a powerful river and the nature, which does not recognise the man-made physical borders, and diversity through a growing number of layers of varying affiliations, commitments and responsibilities that the countries and other interest groups assumed along with their own development, growth and maturity.

This is not to say that there were no conscious attempts to keep the virtual and inherent unity of the Region. A number of sustained efforts of one form or another witness decades-long attempts to approach this region as an undivided area with specific needs, with a culture that is different from what each of its member states could offer on its own, and with a number of problems which represent region-wide, systemic properties that cannot be found in any of its member countries, when considered individually rather than as part of the systemic unit called the Danube Region.

Such (most of the time intergovernmental or supra-national) efforts have proceeded with baby steps in strengthening the idea that this Region has much more in common than not. Primary attempts to renegotiate and reorganise this dominating cognitive model have definitely been difficult. This is reflected in the way in which the Danube specific topics were approached within the frameworks of these formalised efforts as well as in the way in which they were conceived of, integrated and dealt with in the ongoing processes affecting the areas of the Danube Region they were covering. It is also visible in the increased number of entities dealing with Danube related topics at various levels, as well as in the overlapping of the activities of those entities, and in the fragmentation and the isolation of the measures undertaken to solve problems that require joint, focused and coordinated action.

An overview of these formal, region-wide, or less formal and partial activities could offer some insight into the current complexity of the Danube Region and will help us later deepen the discussion on the opportunities offered by the EUSDR.

In this specific context one would necessarily start with the efforts undertaken by entities such as: the Stability Pact for South East Europe and the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI) with the *Danube Cooperation Process* initiative and their efforts for the establishment of the *International Commission for the Sava River Basin* (Sava Commission) as well as in the area of inland waterways transport and navigation related infrastructure; the *International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River* (ICPDR) in the area of environment; the *Danube International Commission* concerning

navigation; the *Corridor VII Steering Committee* in the area of transport and transport infrastructure; the *Danube Tourist Commission* concerning the promotion of Danube tourism and the Danube as a brand tourist destination; the *Working Community of Danube Regions* (ARGE Donaulaender) concerning sub-regional territorial cooperation along the Danube; the *Institute for the Danube and Central Europe* (IDM) concerning research, academic and cultural cooperation a/o.

To the work of the above mentioned Danube specific, region-wide entities, one should add many other entities and initiatives, of bigger or smaller size and geographical scope, active within Eastern and South Eastern Europe, of political or other nature, that affect the Danube Region in one way or another. To add further to the acronym puzzle, one should include here a number of East European initiatives covering various topics such as the *Central European Free Trade Agreement* (CEFTA), the *South East European Transport Observatory* (SEETO), the *South East European Regional Environmental Centre* (REC), the *SEE Research network*, to name just a few. The activities of these initiatives play a special role for several key countries from this area, such as those of the lower Danube region.

If this does not seem complex enough, one should not forget that the countries of the Danube Region are in various ways connected to activities of the European Union. Member States and especially their NUTS II and III sub-national units have been during the last decades very active in participating in EU territorial cooperation programmes, among which all the INTERREG programmes and the newly reorganised Central Europe and South East Europe Programmes. A number of Danube related projects, studies and networks emerged in the framework of these programmes such as the Donauhans, the Donauregionen a/o. Candidate or potential candidate countries are bound to fulfil their *Stabilisation and Association Agreements* commitments, which include many areas of great relevance to the Danube Region as a whole, such as for example transport infrastructure. For the non-member states such concrete activities are included in the EU Neighbourhood Policy, through which a number of specific activities are performed in these countries with EU financial support.

In the end, one should not forget to mention also the efforts of the various international organisations and financing institutions that have active programmes within this part of Europe on specific topics or specific areas such as the UN Environmental Programmes for the Carpathians, the programmes and the projects of the *Central European Initiative* (CEI), the *Black Sea Economic*

*Cooperation Organisation (BSEC), the Visegrad Four or the Vienna Economic Forum among others.*<sup>1</sup>

It should be kept in mind that this is not an exhaustive list. This simple enumeration of the bigger and more significant institutionalised efforts towards the development of various sectors or (geographical) parts of the Danube Region should be enough to show that with so many activities, it is inevitable for activities to overlap and valuable resources to be dispersed, instead of concentrated. This also means that the idea of commonness and of how the common social space would look like, have been equally divergent so far, although many, if asked, could also easily identify the resources or the topics that are of common interest to all. Various aspects of the consequences of this situation are discussed in detail in the following section.

### **3. Conceptual divergence and ideological convergence**

What is characteristic for all the entities mentioned in the above overview is that they all address a specific topic / sector relevant for the development of the Danube and/or a specific target / interest group. Efforts to bridge the gap between activities within various sectors and disciplines, as much as between the various stakeholder groups are formally almost inexistent. The main consequence of this situation is a conceptual divergence: everyone employs a different approach to implement their activities, which may not necessarily contribute to a unified and balanced development of the Region as such and simultaneously to the strengthening of the formal image of the Danube social space of interaction.

This conceptual divergence has negative impacts both on the behaviour of the public authorities responsible for the decision-making and for the policy development processes, as much as on the perception of the citizens, who eventually need to benefit from the implementation of those policies, internalise the new spaces of interaction and the concepts associated with them, as well as ensure their sustainable functioning.

The lack of a clear overview of the activities undertaken within the different development sectors and concerning the various geographical areas of the Danube, the fragmentation and proliferation of efforts produces a state of confusion within which it is very difficult to undertake coordinated action and monitor advancement towards a certain goal. Such situations provide state actors and other public authorities with multiple mechanisms for realisation of their immediate national or local interests, which may not coincide with the needs of the Danube region as a whole, and which most often contradict actions and

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<sup>1</sup> Information or references on most of the regional or international entities and institutions mentioned in this section can be retried through various sections of the webpage of the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI).

undermine efforts undertaken by other members or interest groups within the Region. For the citizens in such situations, messages about the emerging space of interaction contradict the existing concepts about that space, and they are often contradictory themselves, depending on which of the many (Danube) entities emanates them. Thus, for the citizens, it is impossible to create a frame and sort the requirements of these messages in a logical way and thereof successfully integrate them into their own social reality.

This so called conceptual divergence, as a two way process between those proposing a new interaction space and those expected to internalise that space, is reflected in the performance of the above mentioned main entities.

Namely, hardly any of these entities covers the same number of Danube countries and hardly any of them is based on the same type of institutional cooperation principles and organisation. This situation is context driven. The circumstances of the periods in which they were established and the topics they selected as their primary interest, conditioned the organisational framework they chose for their cooperation. Beside the politically driven cooperation mechanisms, the different status of the member countries participating in these regional cooperation bodies determined, most of the time, the form under which such regional cooperation was going to take place.

In spite of this contextual drawback, the positive aspect of such developments was that they did emerge and that they served as a living example of the idea that the Danube Region exists beyond the borders of its “member states”, and that it has needs that must be dealt with jointly, trans-nationally. Although the value of the available resources of the parties did not allow too much negotiation and redefinition of the terms according to which their interaction model would function, at the moment when they were created they represented innovative and new spaces of association and, for a certain period of time, served as an example of a new model of association and interaction. They also provided alternative dialogue forums, where Danube countries could meet and discuss problems of common interest, and hopefully find common solutions.

The growing number of such mechanisms that the Danube countries, other public entities and interest groups could use for attaining similar objectives and for obtaining more or less similar results, produced a turning point in this state of affairs. It brought about a reduction in the level of their participation in some of these entities and a transfer of the issues usually solved / discussed within those entities to other entities, other spaces for interaction, of a similar type. This newly emerged behaviour pattern affected the level of success and the rationale of some of these entities. In time, some of them lost their value as an effective interaction resource for their constituent elements and became obsolete, inefficient and unsuitable to the contemporary circumstances, while others gained in relevance through the adoption of new, innovative approaches

for reaching old objectives and for communication with the relevant target groups.

The coexistence of this layered system of activities facing the Danube Region with diverging concepts of what the Danube Region represents, and what the Danube should represent, created the need for coherence at all levels and for all parties involved. In such complex context, questions like: where does the Danube Region start and where does it end?; what are the main characteristics of the Danube Region that its constituent units do not manifest, and what are the crucial problems of this region? were bound to emerge sooner or later. The social interaction spaces, so far identified with the idea of the Danube region, were put under pressure for redefinition and for further deeper equilibrium for all parties involved.

This also required the will to overcome the existing conceptual divergence on many historically and contextually determined topics and situations, as well as to agree upon a new ideological convergence and act in accordance with a macro-regionally agreed-upon guiding vision for the Danube Region. It called for a (re-)definition of the Danube Region and the approaches through which dialogue and interaction in this area have been proceeding to date.

#### **4. The EUSDR as an opportunity**

The new debate on EU macro-regions came at the right time and offered a suitable ground for a fresh start for the Danube. The decision of the Council of the European Union on the elaboration of a *EU Strategy for the Danube Region* was preceded by sustained diplomatic activities and efforts on behalf of a number of Danube countries that showed their willingness to give a new coat to Danube cooperation and take it to a new phase of its existence.

The need for ideological convergence on the side of the Danube countries was also supported by the stalemate on several politically sensitive issues within some long-standing Danube organisations, such as the *Danube International Commission* and its failure to reform and update its Belgrade Convention. This and similar stalemate conundrums called for new (political) dialogue spaces and the EU proved to be the preferred mediator and negotiation ground by all.

Besides offering this new interpretative opportunity, the EU played a crucial role in accelerating and facilitating these processes even before this opportunity was ripe.

The EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 have included a number of countries within which the Danube represents an important resource and identity element. Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria house the main parts of the Danube. Their EU membership required also the adaptation of a number of their policies that were also directly affecting their attitude towards and their perception of the Danube. This is not to say that they had not dealt with the Danube before, yet with their EU membership a significant shift in a number of

their policies, such as for example the environmental, and especially the water management policies, occurred. Thus, the Danube and the Danube region acquired a different, priority, status within their own national policies.

This positive development was also supported by the European Commission and its direct involvement in the activities of several region-wide cooperation mechanisms, in which most of the Danube countries, including non-EU member states, committed themselves to participate, such as for example the ICPDR, the Corridor VII, the Regional Cooperation Council, the International Financial Institutions a/o. The presence of the EU in these entities represented many times a conditioning factor that kept activities going, even if not always with the most visible results and although, on many occasions, activities and progress reviews in these entities served as a place of 'fame and shame', where a clear overview of how far one has come on its road to Europe was provided. They served as additional benchmarks within the array of other obligations and tasks that the various countries needed to fulfil with respect to the EU, no matter whether they were already members or aspired to be one. This situation maintained or, at moments, also raised the value of specific resources crucial for the establishment of the Danube social space.

That the time for ideological convergence and gradual integration of the activities within the Danube Region in one comprehensive and integrated strategy had come was made clear by the general and more frequent agreement, within the various cooperation mechanisms and on various occasions, that all the necessary preconditions were available. There are enough policies and legal instruments, there are enough financial resources and there are enough region-wide entities sufficiently specialised in implementing the needed priority actions and measures.

The advantages of ideological convergence in the case of the Danube are as clear for the EU as for most of the Danube countries – reduced number of measures, clearer targets, more efficient use of available resources, better coordination, and policy convergence. For those on their path to EU membership it also means less reporting to different institutions on one and the same issue and definitely less administrative obstacles and hurdles. For the EU, the Danube region will be an opportunity to create a unified mechanism to push forward integration and enlargement policies, to use EU structural and cohesion funds in a more effective way and to achieve better results in terms of cohesion on the long run. It will also be an opportunity to bring together relevant legal obligations and commitments of the countries and eliminate superfluous or overlapping expectations. For all, a bit more order and transparency with respect to activities related to the Danube Region and on how all these fit into the bigger European picture.

Beside these very objective advantages, the idea for a Danube macro-region provided also a fertile ground for the newly developed concept of macro-

regions, especially in the context of the EU territorial cooperation policy. This new concept defined macro-regions as areas “including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features and challenges” (DG Regional Policy, 2009). This definition incorporates two features that are of great importance for the creation of new spaces of interaction, as well as new dimensions of identity. The first one refers to the introduction of (Member) States, or entire states, as potential partners for cooperation, alongside the regional and local authorities (from the administrative point of view, most of the time understood as sub-national self-government units), to whom territorial cooperation has been primarily addressed so far. Additionally, it provides for the formalisation of the identity and interaction spaces that can be bigger than the national borders of an EU Member (or non-Member) State and legitimises the existence of challenges that can be cognitively perceived only within this new macro-regional identity space. With this, the foundations for a new interaction and identity spaces were formally provided and the value of the resources to be exchanged within this new social space has increased. It shall be the task of all the parties involved in the process of elaboration of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region to clarify which are the key common resources, to determine their values and to decide the terms under which they shall be exchanged within the macro-regional social space of the Danube.

## **5. Education as a catalyser**

Besides the short and mid-term goal setting, the EUSDR is also an opportunity for the sectors and the topics, which have so far not been so visibly and intensively covered, to acquire a more organised cooperation form. Education, research, culture and tourism, as the main generators and carriers of identity elements and as the interface for interaction with the wider public and the ‘Danube citizens’, are the sectors that may benefit from the EUSDR, but that could and should play a crucial role in shaping this new space for transnational interaction and identity.

Education and research are of special importance as they shape the perception of young people and the way in which future generations will conceive their own identity i.e. whether they would still view it as linear or as multi-dimensional. In this context, a number of activities are already rolling at the EU level, such as the Bologna Process, the Erasmus Mundus and other similar exchange programmes for students, the development of the European Research Area and a number of actions to support the mobility of scholars and researchers as well as the continuation of the *EU Research Framework Programme*. These actions apply to the Danube Region as well and have to a certain extent also been extended to the non-EU Danube countries.

In the specific Danube context, the work of the Danube Rectors Conference (DRC) is of significant importance, representing a unique exchange framework reserved for cooperation among universities from the Danube Region. Yet, this is hardly sufficient. The Danube Region is undergoing a transformation process which needs to be supported with suitable programmes for awareness raising, strengthening and discussing the basis of a common Danube identity, providing the new generations with alternative thinking and perception models as well as providing the region with suitably skilled and capable human resources. This requires university as well as high school studies and programmes that would approach the idea of the Danube Region in a coherent manner and which would provide the Danube Region with the labour force of tomorrow. Inland navigation, either for transport or for tourist purposes, is one of the areas that could benefit from a strengthened education cooperation and could provide a starting point for the needs of these sectors in the near future in terms of human resources.

Unlike traditional education programmes, the Danube specific programmes should focus on inter-disciplinarity and inter-institutionality and should provide the future generations with a new way of looking at their own identity and role within the wider Danube Region. Such programmes would develop alternative models for understanding the history and the diversity of the region and ways to overcome the dividing elements among the various populations of the region. EU actions should contribute to such strengthened regional educational approach within the Danube.

## **6. Conclusions**

The Danube Region has existed as a common space for interaction for centuries. The changing circumstances produced also a change in the way its constituent units perceived its existence and role. Also, intersecting tendencies and changes pressured for renegotiation of the terms on which the current Danube space was developing. The EU territorial cooperation mechanisms and the development of the concept of macro-regional territorial cooperation offered an opportunity for a transformation of the existing Danube Region into a more specific, concrete and comprehensive cooperation framework for its transformation and for the integration of all the relevant actors and initiatives in a more visible and transparent space of cooperation and coexistence.

The process has started with the decision of the Council of the EU that the EC should elaborate a EU Strategy for the Danube Region. It will establish priorities and initial actions, define the role of some of the many Danube-wide entities and it will hopefully solve many of the currently outstanding issues. Yet, the creation of the true Danube Region and the Danube identity is a long-term process whose ideological convergence should be led and overseen by the educational authorities. Some new concepts are already there, but others are in a

terrible need of being constantly defined, recognised and explained, until they become an everyday reality for the citizens of this region. Only when its citizens accept the Danube Region as an inherent part of their enriched, non-linear identity, we will be able to acknowledge that we have done our job and that yet another transformation process is nearing its end.

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