

The Danube, bluer than ever

The river, Europe's 'aorta', crosses ten countries and both separates and unites East and West

by Andrea Affaticati

Unlike most other rivers, the length of the Danube, the second longest river in Europe after the Volga, is calculated from the end rather than from the beginning – because an agreement has never been reached about where the river actually starts. Or to be more accurate, which of the two streams, the Breg and the Brigach, carries more water to the point where they converge and become the Danube. And thus the source of the river has been decided *ex cathedra*, obviously in a location close to where the Breg and the Brigach merge: the city of Donaueschingen, in the park of the former residence of the Fürstenberg princes.

But the Danube's length actually starts being measured 2,845 km (1,768 miles) to the south east: in Sulina, the town on the delta where the river finally flows into the Black Sea.

The Danube is the aorta of the old continent. It is today as it has always been. Though now the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal means you can set sail in Rotterdam and disembark on the Black Sea, at Sulina.

The Danube is a major waterway and a communication corridor between peoples and cultures. Once viewed as the lynchpin holding together the entire multiethnic and multicultural empire of the Hapsburgs, it is now considered a powerhouse for the development of the European Union. Indeed, out of the ten countries it flows through, seven belong to the EU. And that's another reason why in July 2011, the "EU strategy for the Danube Region" (EUSDR) was launched under the aegis of the European Commissioner for Regional Policy, Johannes Hahn. The plan focuses on the Danube as a macro-re-

gion, an engine driving economic development, ensuring energy security, fostering mobility while protecting the environment. This is why four other countries, which the river does not actually run through yet are included in its drainage basin, have also joined the EUSDR – the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro.

The funding for this strategy, as we are told by Commissioner Hahn's office, comes from Structural Funds amounting to 100 billion euros, allotted between 2007 and 2013. In addition further funds are being channeled from the "Connecting Europe Facility" program, earmarked for the development of the TEN-T Pan-European Transport network. Indeed, the Rhine-Danube is one of the network's 'corridors', Corridor VII to be precise. "Because as European integration moves ahead, the Danube will become increasingly important as a link between the supply, production and consumption markets it flows through", the officials explain. Though it is unlikely the Danube will go back to carrying the 80 million tons of goods a year it used to record during the Soviet era.

At that time they shipped raw materials and military equipment along the river, particularly from east to west. Nowadays most of the shipments travel the other way; primarily high-tech products that weigh a lot less.

The killer blow to major goods shipping along the Danube came not so much with the fall of the Wall, but with the Balkan wars of the early Nineties: "At the time the volume crashed to 5 million tons", explains Otto Schwetz, Chairman of the Pan-European Corridor VII, "while now we're back up to 11 million." Not a bad result, but just one tenth of what travels down the Rhine, which is why one of the first goals to be achieved in terms of the river's navigability is to top 19 million tons by 2020, adds Schwetz.

It's not an impossible target, but it will only be met if a number of 'structural' problems are



BEINER RIEDLER / ANZENBERGER/CONTRASTO

addressed, including the lack of efficient infrastructure and facilities along certain stretches of river, according to Vojislav Jevtic, head of waterway shipping for the Austrian logistics firm Gebrüder Weiss. “The ports, particularly in Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria and Serbia are often wanting”, Jevtic notes, “there’s a shortage of cranes and the link roads between the port and the motorway or rail networks are non-existent”.

Then there’s the problem of navigability. The Danube carries with it tons of debris every year, and there are also times when the water levels are low. Maintenance of the river bed is there-

fore of the utmost importance. But while this is regularly performed along the German and Austrian stretches, upkeep in the other countries to the south is poor.

Currently the river is navigable approximately 220 days of the year, but Otto Schwetz explains that figure must top 302 if the Danube is to be competitive. Though according to Jevtic, the river is ideal for special cargo, weighing 100 tons or more, it is unlikely to attract container traffic: “Navigation times are too long”.

The Danube’s main competitor is road freight, even in a country like Hungary, which

+ The Danube flows through ten different states, seven of which are in the European Union.



REUTERS/CONTRASTO/RAIU SIGRETI

boasted one of the most important river shipping companies in Communist times, Mahart. The reason roads win out is that – even though Corridor VII ‘only’ needs 1.8 billion euro in funding – politicians sometimes prefer to opt for roads “because they bring in more votes.”

However, apart from ‘national’ preferences, the macro-region model has already recorded one major achievement: the New Europe Bridge. This two-lane motorway with a rail track running between the two carriageways, costs €266 million, (€106m from European Cohesion Funds). Since June, it has linked the Romanian

city of Calafat with Vidin in Bulgaria. This is a historic event seeing as Romania and Bulgaria, which share a 464 km (288 mile) border along the banks of the Danube, were joined by just one bridge up until then. At this stage, all one has to hope for, as someone pointed out during the bridge opening ceremony, “is that its two kilometers in length do not end up being the only comfortable stretch of road in this corner of Europe”. **E**

E The Danube delta at Sulina, Romania.

Andrea Affaticati is an Austrian journalist specialised in Central Europe and Balkan countries.