

The Danube, an Element of the Modern Romanian Statehood

A Discussion on Geography, History and Identity

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“Wherever you see it, in our country, the Danube is a complex creature, which has seen and suffered a lot and bears on its face the traces of all its struggles . . . [The Danube] is the only natural axis of Central Europe.”¹

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THE DANUBE is part of the history of the places it passes through, often being a link between peoples or a unifying factor for social units. In the present article, we propose an analysis of the river starting from the sociology of infrastructure. At the same time, we will review some references of important geographers, geopoliticians and historians who highlight the crucial role of the Danube in shaping the modernity of the Romanian space, as well as its continental importance.

The Danube is the most political river in Europe—more political than the Rhine. Therefore, the Romanian state, the master of the Lower Danube and the Delta, acquires, with or without its will, a superlative historical significance in the life of contemporary Europe. This accounts for the presence of the ‘European Commission’ in Galați.²

A Sociological Approach

THE SOCIOLOGY of infrastructure is a new field of research in the social sciences, which refers to the link that is created between the elements of infrastructure and the social, economic, cultural or even (geo)political space. The permanently built connection between the interior and the exterior space of a community can be discovered (also) by studying the infrastructural connections.³

*Infrastructure represents (1) that expression of connections within a socio-economic unit and, at the same time, (2) that connection permanently built between the inner space of a community and its exterior, where by inner space we mean a network of “soul interdependencies,” while through the external one we refer to the (inter) national economy or to society as a whole.*⁴

Thus, according to the theory, infrastructure can be understood with the help of several auxiliary concepts. For example, in terms of *appearance*, an element can fall into the category of natural or artificial infrastructure.⁵ In terms of *form*, the infrastructure can be divided between land, air, sea, river, telecom, and virtual.⁶ From the point of view of the *content*, there are two constituent forms that can be observed: the material and the social infrastructure,⁷ which do not exist per se, but are interdependent.⁸ If we look at infrastructure in terms of its *nature*, we can operate with two other categories: positive infrastructure (which generates linkages necessary to coagulate a social unit) or negative (which “consumes” the space through which it passes and weakens the social unit).⁹ As for the infrastructure *visibility* indicator, it is inversely proportional to the integration of elements in the socio-economic space (the better integrated and in line with the infrastructure potential, the more invisible they become through the function of fluidization, saving time or money).¹⁰ Finally, the infrastructure can be analyzed through the three functions it can fulfill: 1) preserving a social unit and organizing its own contents; 2) adaptation to new forms, and 3) integration/connection and circulation.¹¹

From the perspective of this new theory,¹² the Danube can be analyzed both as an element of material infrastructure—of continental importance because it has had and will continue to have a “decisive contribution to the physical organization of the world,”¹³ and as an element of social infrastructure, being the source of specific representations in the collective mentality of the Romanian communities on both banks, reaching the point of becoming part of the symbolic infrastructure, therefore of the identity framework.

*The only heirs of the Eastern Roman world are the Romanians. Many times the genesis of our nation was treated superficially, considering that we are the descendants of the Daco-Roman synthesis and that the space where the Romanian people was born is the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic one. It is true that part of the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space later became part of the Roman Empire, but we believe that the Latinized Thracians brought an important contribution to the Romanization of the newly conquered area. As the Dacians were part of the great Thracian family, it would be more correct to use the name of Thracian-Roman synthesis when discussing the formation of the Romanian people. Because, until the arrival of the Slavs, there was a Romanian ethnic unity separated only by the Danube. This is how we can explain the strong Vlach movements in the Balkans between the 10th and 12th centuries, and the support that, at a certain moment, the Vlachs Peter and Asen found beyond the Danube. There were not two Latin nations in the Balkans, but a single Romanian one, having as its component parts the Aromanians, the Megleno-Romanians, the Istro-Romanians (like in fact all the Balkan Vlachs).*¹⁴

*The great importance of the Danube is that from this historical issue a new nation was created.*¹⁵

The Geographical, Geoeconomic, and Ethnopolitical Perspectives

AT THE macro-level, the Danube is the second longest river in Europe, relevant not only for the ten countries and four capitals it crosses, but for the whole world. Specifically, N. Iorga argues, the Danube gained economic relevance after “the export of grain of our country started, and, secondly, when steam navigation began.”¹⁶ This is explained by the fact that the river is significant not for its upper course (where it is a “national river”), but only for its part from the outflow.¹⁷ S. Mehedinți calls it “the eighth sea of the world” and integrates it into a “river diagonal,” along the Rhine. Its location has proved to be, over time, ideal for a trade route which connects the Anglo-German space to the (Far) East.¹⁸

*Running parallel to the Mediterranean, it can borrow part of the Mediterranean’s attributes, establishing links between the continental part of Europe and the continental part of Asia, just as the Mediterranean establishes the connection between maritime Europe and maritime Asia. Before the Suez Canal was dug, this was the most favorable connection in existence. Since the opening of the Suez Canal, the Danube was remained a secondary branch of this link, but quite important because it can offer Central Europe an easier access than the Mediterranean.*¹⁹

After 1992, when the Main–Danube Canal was completed, the river crossing corridor between Rotterdam and Constanța became the shortest navigable connection between the North Sea and the Black Sea.²⁰ Moreover, goods from Australia and the Far East destined for Central Europe shorten their journey by 4,000 km,²¹ which in terms of reducing costs and time is a useful solution for international trade.

*The Danube still has a lot to say regarding the future of the Romanian nation and state. . . . I have shown . . . quite clearly the geo-economic and geo-political role of the Rhine–Danube river diagonal. Taken together, these rivers form the “eighth sea” of Europe, incomparably more favorable than the Mediterranean in terms of shortening the route of goods between the Anglo-Germans and the Indians and the Far East.*²²

From this perspective, without taking into account the flow of the Volga, which is “doomed to spill its waters in a sea closed between the Caucasus and the deserts of Central Asia,”²³ the Danube has the quality of being the largest European river directly connected to the planetary ocean. “The Volga crosses only the Russian plain and flows into a sea closed like a sack.”²⁴

The particular position of the Danube, which flows, unlike other waters, in the W-E direction, right through the center of the continent, not only provides a navigable route, not only unites distinct geographical areas, but also acquires a geocultural dimension, as it connects

*people with a high density, with a strong industrial and commercial activity. Three large cultural circles connect the Danube: Central Europe, the Mediterranean through the Balkan Peninsula, and the eastern steppes that end on the banks of this river.*²⁵

On the scale of history, this special location of the river has generated on its banks a space permanently found on the “to conquer list,” especially in the Lower Danube region,²⁶ turning the Romanian Lands as a whole into a *route*.^{27, 28, 29}

Romania has the good fortune—with all the associated risks, of course—to stand at such a geopolitical crossroads. We are what Nicolae Iorga called a state of European necessity. Leaning on the Carpathian fortress and watching over the mouths of the Danube, standing guard here in the name and in interest of the whole of Europe behind it—and even beyond—it can be said that our Romania lives and speaks here not only for itself. Our state is, therefore, in the attention of the East and the West, the North and the South alike—and at all times. This is, as has been said, a truly

key position. And this attention of another for you can come under the form of care and sympathy, it can be protection, but it can also be appetite or danger. It means, therefore, that more than anywhere else, the watch at such points must always be vigilant (your watch, that of the one sitting there). The idea of boundary, of international economic power and appetite, of autarchy and independence, must always be borne there in the consciousness, as an obsession. We are, through our position on the globe . . . like a Carpathian sheepfold in a wolf's ford. Shepherds, as such, must all have a good cudgel and... sleep as little as possible. It is understood, therefore: for a State in such a situation, in which the winds, the waves follow you everywhere, it is the duty, first of all, to know this situation, to be permanently aware of it, good and bad, with all that it entails. All the members of this state, and first of all its ruling class, must always keep their thoughts on them.—But all these, let's note, are concerns and notions of strict order and par excellence geopolitical—and only through geopolitics they are understood and lived. And, then, isn't it superfluous to ask ourselves if the flower of this young discipline must be planted in the glade of the Romanian mind? Yes, we can say that we are born to be... geopolitical.³⁰

In fact, both Iorga and Vâlsan³¹ argue that the Danube was a road and an intersection of spheres of influence at the same time, which favored the preservation of a state of instability over time, but also the emergence of a particular typology of people, meant to cope with the vicissitudes, “which the Danube needed.” In short, during all this time, along the river, the only factor of historical permanence was the Romanian people:

When the North wanted to go to the South, when the West wanted to touch the East, this is where they met . . . How not to be a resilient nation, how not to trust in our endurance, when for so many centuries we had to gather our strength before daring to be ourselves? . . . What creates an admirable unity in these regions, despite those who fight on the banks of the Danube, is this fact: the existence of a special people that feeds, eventually defends, and keeps the continuity in these places. And this people of ours is seemingly created for this very purpose. In those destructive clashes . . . a permanent factor was needed—us. This permanent factor was also needed for another purpose than feeding the others, or guiding and informing them . . . We were created as a nation by the political circumstances of these parts, out of the mixture between Romanized Thracians and Roman colonists later enriched with the blood of the Slavs and other peoples who came to these parts, but all in moderation, taking as much as it was necessary so as not to endanger the character of our language, popular conscience, culture—we were and are the people that the Danube needed.³²

From a geographical point of view and, simultaneously, relevant for the Romanian space, the Danube is part of a “circle of waters” (along with the Tisza, the Dniester and Black Sea) that outlines “a geographical land shaped with a rare symmetry,”³³ a geographical harmony made up of rivers and the sea, passes, mountains, hills, plateaus, plains and the delta.³⁴

In this geographical harmony, the Danube finds its place as part of an ethnopolitical whole, a fundamental coordinate of the Romanian people, along with the sea and Carpathians. More precisely, this is a geopolitical “façade,” as the geographers Vâlsan³⁵ and Mehedinți called it in their studies.

*For simplification, we begin with the conclusion: The life of our people has had two coordinates: on the one hand, the Mountain and the Forest, on the other hand, the Danube and the Sea. Whoever mentions the Danube must immediately mention the Black Sea. However, there is more, for they must also add the Bosphorus (which is just an extension of the Danube), then the Dardanelles . . . The Danube cannot and must not be separated, not for a moment, from the Black Sea and the Straits, with which it forms a “fundamental coordinate” for the past and future destiny of our people.*³⁶

The Danube cannot be understood from a geoeconomic point of view outside the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which condition its opening to the East by the political and economic context that governs the two crossings.

*The Danube, in a certain respect, does not end at Sulina. The Black Sea is almost a closed sea. The commercial movement of the Danube will never stop on the shores of the Black Sea. The real trade mouths of the Danube are at the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles and the whole life of the river is dependent on what happens around these Straits. Therefore, the problem of the Danube is partly the problem of the Straits and everything that will be decided there will be of great importance for the river and for our entire country.*³⁷

In essence, the river in question is one of the elements of natural geography that attaches “a European significance”³⁸ to our country, both by the “relevance of the unhindered traffic at the Danube mouths” and by the “security of the vital Bucharest–Constanța road.”³⁹ In order to understand how the European dimension was acquired due to the Danube, especially during the modernization of the state, we will describe below the relevant geohistorical processes.

Because of the Danube, the inhabitant of the Romanian Plain feels closer to Bavaria, for example, than to the beautiful plain of Rumelia which is at a compara-

tively smaller distance. The Danube is the geographical thread that connects us to the West, and one of the reasons we are not Balkan is the fact that the Danube separates us from the Balkans.⁴⁰

Geohistorical Perspective on the Axiality of the Danube

THE PRESENCE of the Danube in these places generated a nation *on both its banks*, a well-defined identity construct both locally⁴¹ and nationally, clearly distinct from the rest of the peoples in the region (Slavic or Hungarian). From this point of view, the Danube did not represent a dividing line, but a connection between its banks, i.e. it was an axis.

Ever since the time of the state structure established by Burebista, the lower course of the Danube was seen rather as an “internal water,” as the historian N. Iorga stated about the upper course located in the later German territories. In fact, the “Danube issue,” which is different from that of the Rhine, represents precisely this characteristic of the river: to generate in its vicinity *a certain type of people*.⁴²

*At first, the Danube flows between German lands, and no one thought to raise claims on these regions where the river passes through perfectly national territories. Moreover, this upper course of the Danube does not flow between rival German territories. Up to a certain point it passes across a well-defined territory, then across another, just as well-defined. All the Germans consider the Danube as a kind of national river, Donau, just as we consider the Danube as a national water—the popular songs are full of references to it, to us and to those across the Danube.*⁴³

The Danube, as an element of natural infrastructure, has oscillated throughout history between its dividing function and that of connecting the two shores and the worlds on them. On the one hand, it represented a link between the communities on both banks (the Romanian historical communities in Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine), acting as a *passageway*.^{44, 45}

If the East-West circulation is impossible, we saw that the N-S, or S-N traffic is much easier on the Danube. This is a significant matter. The Iron Gates massif allows the transition from the Southern Carpathians to the Balkans and vice versa, of course to a mountain population with a predominantly pastoral occupation. Since Trajan until now, in the whole Carpatho-Balkan land, there was only one such population: the Romanians. This is something that none of our neighbors have ever disputed. The notion of Vlach is so closely related to that of shepherd that

*in the Balkan Peninsula today Vlach means shepherd. So if there was a nation that could enjoy the benefits offered by the Iron Gates massif, this nation could only be the Romanian one.*⁴⁶

On the other hand, the Danube had the function of demarcation from the Slavic or Ottoman Other, especially during the Phanariots or after the appearance of nation-states in the Balkans in the early 19th century.

*In the presentation made before the Romanian Affairs Commission, in Paris, on 22 February 1919, Ion I. C. Brătianu, presenting his (geopolitical) arguments for a Greater Romania within its natural borders, declared . . . “We cannot conceive the existence of the Romanian nation without the Dniester, just like we cannot conceive it without the Danube and the Tisza, in order to separate us from the Slavic element.”*⁴⁷

*The Danube, with the arch that it makes south of the Banat, constitutes a border between the Slavic Balkan world and the Romanian North-Danubian space.*⁴⁸

As a digression, a river is one of those geographical features that give *individuality* to a territory, whether it is already national or emergent, an individuality defined by scientific criteria and filtered through the prism of the researcher’s national consciousness.⁴⁹ George Vâlsan is one of the Romanian intellectuals who often drew attention to the relationship of interdependence between national consciousness and the geographical framework in which it manifests itself. According to him, the Danube is one of those geographical conditions that proved to be favorable to the unity and cohesion of the Romanian nation, a matter that goes beyond Renan’s definition of the nation, fashionable at the time. Thus, Vâlsan concludes that the national consciousness is “an evolving soul force”⁵⁰ which is directly determined by particular material elements, such as the geographical conditions.

*But when you ask yourself how the great mass of the Romanian people acquired this consciousness, you have to admit that you are almost faced with a mystery. . . . For the Kingdom, the time of schooling and military service was decisive, but for the whole of Romania some geographical and ethnic influences may have contributed more. The rivers that pierce the mountains are scattered, accompanied by roads, from central Transylvania to the four winds, there are quite numerous passages, the Danube, which allows a relatively lively movement of goods and fishermen from the Serbian lands towards the sea, and even the mountains gather every year shepherds from one cline and the other, then in the population movements in so many forms and so numerous . . .*⁵¹

Furthermore, it is important that these geographical conditions have a direct influence on the actions of a nation over time^{52,53}: “The geographical basis fundamentally conditions the development and orientation of a people.”⁵⁴

This digression was necessary in order to emphasize the connection between the geographical framework and the process of formation of the Romanian people, which followed the two axes of the Carpathians and Danube, on both sides of it. Moreover, this connection is not a superficial one, but one of the utmost importance. Both Vâlsan and Mehedinți, and even Iorga discuss in detail *the axial character of the river* in the formation of the Romanian people.

*The thing was natural: the Danube was . . . the axis of our nation's life, since the earliest historical references . . .*⁵⁵

*The Danube [is characterized by] its geographical position, as the axis of the Carpatho-Balkan basin.*⁵⁶

*The Danube is not a border at all in the Iron Gates region and it is even less the edge of a world, and whoever lived to the north, had to live to the south. The Danube was in the past rather a Romanian national axis, as is the Carpathian chain, and not a border. A river only separates in times of danger, in times of peace it is an element of connection and propagation.*⁵⁷

During the Thracian rule, the polity stretched on both banks, as mentioned earlier, transforming the Danube into an inland river for the outlined state structure. And this peculiarity of habitation has been preserved to this day:⁵⁸

*The Thracians held both banks of the Danube. We must think of the Getae. We are told that they lived on the right bank as well as on the left, and this finding leads us to establish an important point for the present circumstances. Can it create any right for us or set a precedent? Is the Danube meant to have the same masters on both banks? I would think so. Especially since today most of the right bank of the Danube is inhabited by Romanians: they are found in Morava, in Timok, and as far as Negotin, in two whole circles in Serbia, in parts of Vidin, in significant numbers, and in the eastern part, in the vicinity of Dobruja, close to Silistra. This is not denied by anyone; state needs may falsify the figures, but there are always means to arrive at an accurate statistic, at least to partially correct the figures doctored by the official agents concerned.*⁵⁹

The next stage experienced by the Danube is the expansion of the Roman Empire, when it becomes *Rome's border* (after previously being an inland river as mentioned above), especially since the southern branch of the Thracians was con-

quered before the northern one, more than a century earlier. Thus, with the Italic advance, the battle for the Danube line began between the Dacians and Romans.

The Romanization process began with Rome's advance into the Balkans and ended before the collapse of the Danube line in 580–602, when the phrase “Torna, torna, fratre” was recorded—according to Byzantine chronicles, the oldest evidence of the Proto-Romanian language, long before the division of the Romanian space done by the Slavs.

The logic of the acculturation process called Romanization helps us understand that it did not happen only between the conquest of Dacia (106) and the Aurelian retreat (271), but with the initiation of cultural and economic contacts. The Romanization process began at the latest in the 3rd–2nd centuries, with the conquest of Illyria, respectively Macedonia (Thrace) by Rome, and lasted long after the Aurelian retreat, through permanent exchanges between the Roman Empire (later the Byzantine Empire) and the Daco-Romans on the Danube and Carpathians. It should be noted that the Roman Empire (Byzantine) recaptured the Danube line in depth, on the Turnu-Severin–Curtea de Argeș–Ploiești–Galați line, in the 4th century . . . , and that Byzantium had military bases in Dobruja until the 11th century.⁶⁰

In fact, the Latin language came “from the West on the valleys of the Sava and the Danube, it extended to the shores of the Pontus, where until then only Greek had been spoken. . . . it was the sign that the sea, once barbaric, then Greek, had now become a great Roman one.”⁶¹ After the acculturation process was started by the conquest and Latinization of the Dacians, after the proto-Romans already developed their own linguistic elements, for the 4th–8th centuries we can already contend that the Romanian people was fully formed, having as its axes the Danube, along both of its banks, and the Carpathians.

The first moment when the Danube becomes a dividing line (but which becomes really relevant only after the appearance of the Balkan nation-states in the 19th century) is the one in which the Slavic migrations divided the Roman world in two: the North-Danubian one and the Balkan one.⁶²

The Danube regains its axiality through the determination of the communities on the two shores to stay in contact. Moreover, there are projects of state value that appear alongside the Danube, or, more precisely, are *centered on the Danube*, such as the Asen dynasty empire, a creation of the southern Romanians that today is increasingly confiscated by Bulgarians, who try to legitimize their presence in the current space they control.

Another interesting medieval formation is that of the Bulgarian and Romanian-Bulgarian Empire created on the axis of the lower Danube and spanning for some time the Balkans and partly the Carpathians. A Carpatho-Balkan state, with the

*Danube as its axis, is logical, although the Danube in these lands is not so much an axis of union, but rather an obstacle, given its too wide and too swampy meadow. Today such a formation is impossible, as a nation-state, due to ethnic differences on both sides . . . In the past, however, when the chronicler Villehardouin showed that the whole Balkan platform was Romanian and later when, according to the testimony of the Bulgarians, the Bulgarian people retreated to the valleys of the Balkans, such a formation was possible not for Bulgarians but rather for the Romanians.*⁶³

Moreover, until the 17th century, the axial quality of the Danube is preserved, as evidenced by the reigns of Mircea the Elder, who was “ruler of both banks up ‘to the great sea,’”⁶⁴ of Stephen the Great, who reached the mouths of the river where he erected the fortress of Chilia Nouă,⁶⁵ or of Michael the Great⁶⁶ who came out victorious at Călugăreni and “along the Danube.”⁶⁷ In fact, at the historical level, the Romanian voivodes understood that the security of their states depended on their control over the Danube—in other words, they had to practice geopolitics *ex officio*.

*As soon as a Wallachian principality gained power, it spread over the mouths of the Danube and Dobruja. The name Bessarabia is the result of this ancient rule of the Basarab family in the 14th and 15th centuries. Stephen the Great did not consider his Moldavia thoroughly defended until he conquered Kilia, “the key and gateway to the whole country of Moldavia, Transylvania and the Danube parts,” as he himself confessed.*⁶⁸

This period represents the end of the era in which the Danube acted as a link for the Romanian people on both banks. With the arrival of the Turks, the access of the Romanians to the Danube was blocked, which generated evolutionary fractures⁶⁹ in the development of the state, a situation that persisted until the Treaty of Adrianople (1829).⁷⁰

*Then darkness comes. The Black Sea becomes a “Turkish lake.” It is deserted all winter, the ships enter it only over the summer, for three months, and only with a designated pilot. The waters of the neighboring sea have become unknown! The Danube was also languishing. Only the Tutrakan people and other Romanian fishermen crossed it, from the sea (Portița) to the parts of Banat.*⁷¹

Thus, in 1812, through the loss of Bessarabia, the Romanians lost “any contact with the seashore.”⁷² As a result of this, regaining access to the Danube–Black Sea geopolitical binomial becomes one of the urgencies of the Romanian space at the dawn of the 19th century, which takes place at the same time with the “decadence of the Turkish empire.”⁷³

Along with the unification of the territory of the two principalities, the founding of a dynasty and other internal reforms, the big problem was: the liberation of the banks of the Danube, approaching the sea routes and the recolonization of the lost land that led to the seashore.⁷⁴

The Danube returned to the attention of the great powers with the involvement of Napoleon and the 1815 Treaty of Vienna, when the river “began to play a European role, involving the trade of all countries from the Rhine to the Black Sea.”⁷⁵ Basically, after 1829, the Romanians began to regain not only access to the river itself, but also to their own development, through the direct involvement of Western powers (especially the British), interested in trade at the mouths of the Danube.

The Treaty of Adrianople, among other things, had driven the Turks away from the left bank of the Danube, from the rayas, had freed the Romanian countries from the Turkish monopoly and allowed Romanian navigation on the river. As soon as the free contact with the river was restored, a new life sprung in our countries. Everything that went to Constantinople and was paid for by the Turks as they pleased was now free for export at competitive prices. The plains that had never felt the plow were presently plowed, the forests exploited, the herds of large cattle and sheep multiplied. All this wealth could only be shipped on the Danube, the only point of contact of the Principalities with the Sea. The Danube acquires a Romanian national importance and the Romanian principalities of that time begin to have a policy of the “mother Danube”—the words belong to the ruler Michael Sturdza.⁷⁶

The rayas . . . were then reattached to Wallachia, and the Turks withdrew, forever, to the right bank of the river. At that moment, the Danube became our true border to the south. . . . The reason was this: Europe, and especially England, needed free movement on the Danube. Just then, the British archipelago was in great need of grain . . . The British Liberals constantly demanded free import . . . Conclusion: the Danube should also be a free way for the export of Romanian cereals, and for the import of goods from English factories.⁷⁷

Although the liberation of the Danube from the Ottomans was achieved, it was replaced by the growing influence of Russia. As a result of the same Treaty of Adrianople, Russia maintained control over the Romanian Lands for more than three decades. The abuses committed by the Russians against the Danube trade intensified, as well as the non-fulfillment of the obligations assumed by the treaty to ensure the cleaning of the Danube canals from a technical point of view. Thus, the fate of the Romanian Danube ports was increasingly endangered and the blockade of the mouths of the Danube more and more possible.

Russia had reached the Black Sea and it did not rest until 1812, when it captured Bessarabia, not so much for its land—the Russian Empire had enough land—but for the mouths of the Danube. And it managed to seize them, through the peace of Adrianople, in 1829. Thus began an era of decadence for the river. Turkey, which had understood its interest in navigating the Danube on which grain, wood, sheep, butter and honey were brought to Constantinople, had taken care to give a convenient depth to the Sulina arm. Russia, as the mistress of the mouths, found the opportunity to give a death blow to the tendencies of Austrian monopolization. It allowed transshipments. The life of the Danube was paralyzed.⁷⁸

The messages of the Romanian rulers did not remain without an echo, Russia's policy to prevent navigation on the Danube being confirmed by England, a direct victim of the traffic congestion which drove to bankruptcy its trading house in the area. Russia's strategy of petty steps culminated in the desire to gain absolute control over the Romanian Principalities by attempting their annexation in 1853. As a result, Russian imperialist tendencies were opposed by Turkey, England, the Kingdom of Sardinia, and France, which emerged victorious from the well-known confrontation, the Crimean War, and imposed the conditions of the Paris Peace. This is when Moldavia obtained the three counties in southern Bessarabia and the Delta, while the Danube was regulated as a free zone for the navigation of commercial vessels. Thus, after more than a century and a half of limitations, access to the mouths of the Danube was finally obtained and the proximity to the sea became possible after the defeat of the Russians in the Crimean War (1856). The Danube becomes a decisive factor for the Union of the Principalities, an aspect recorded by S. Mehedinți:^{79, 80}

England and France intervene in the Danube affair. Don't think it is political romance. There are much more serious and powerful causes that determined the intervention of these powers. By harnessing the power of steam, by creating industrial machines, England and then France, around 1800, underwent a total transformation. From agricultural countries they become industrial countries. In about 30 years, most of the population leaves agriculture and moves on to industry. This has three important consequences, especially in England: a good condition that multiplies the population, a decrease in agricultural production which becomes increasingly insufficient as the population multiplies, and a large increase in manufactured goods that had to be sold. Without urgent measures, a dangerous crisis could be triggered. It needed to look for cheap wheat for the English workforce and markets for industrial products. . . . the Romanian principalities could offer a lot of cheap wheat, had a large capacity for industrial consumption, were close compared to other lands and could be reached by water, the best thing for a maritime power such as England and partly for France. The Danube enters the political circle of

*these countries. But the mouths of the Danube were occupied by Russia, which deliberately let them become clogged. . . . A clash was expected and it happened in 1853, during the Crimean War. France, England, and Italy collaborated with Turkey and defeated the Russians in their own country. The result was Russia's departure from the mouths of the Danube and the complete freedom of navigation on the Danube. This result was enshrined in the Treaty of Paris of 1856. Through it, Moldavia regained three counties in southern Bessarabia and both principalities were so protected as guardians of the mouths of the Danube that they could soon unite, remaining only under a formal suzerainty of Turkey. So, the Danube, through its European importance and given the fact that it wets our earth, was our good fortune. She facilitated our Union.*⁸¹

The lower course of the river becomes the object of activity for a new international body: the European Danube Commission (1856) that manages to keep up with Austria's desire to turn the Danube into an "Austrian river." Two years later, the new sailboats appeared in the area:

*The establishment of the Danube Commission (1856), which would take care of the lower end of the great European river, a kind of United States of Europe with an ideal sovereignty . . . was and will remain in the history of the country our moment of the greatest significance. . . . A new danger arose, however, this time from the west. Goods entered the mouths of the Danube, coming from countries with a more sophisticated industry and being thus cheaper; Austria, in order to secure its markets on the lower Danube, tried to neutralize the influence of the European Commission . . . by a treaty concluded (1857) with Turkey, Bavaria and Württemberg, which in its art. XXI provided for the right to charge navigation fees for works, which would make the Danube independent of the Danube Commission! That is, the Danube was to become indirectly an Austrian river. In Paris (1858), however, this attempt was neutralized . . . which put us even closer to the sea by annexing Dobruja, over which passed the shortest road to Constantinople.*⁸²

However, the great interests in the Lower Danube determined in time the distancing of the European Commission of the Danube from its original mission, as instead it became a 'state within a state' (a fact that hastened its end, in 1938, when Romania withdrew its support), although Romania's contribution to the systematization, cleaning and maintenance of the river increased yearly, a special role in this respect being played by the long reign of Carol I, who ensured the freedom of the Danube and guided the Romanian element toward the sea.^{83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88}

The recovery of the mouths of the Danube after Adrianople triggered a series of crucial events for the Romanian state. Basically, the role of the Danube in

the unification of Moldavia with Wallachia, and then of the Principalities with Dobruja, was decisive: the Union of the Principalities (1859), the independence (1877), the recognition of the Kingdom (1881), the rectification of the borders (1913), the Great Union (1918), rural reform (1921), economic modernization (1919–1938). This is the reason why Simion Mehedinți stated that the Danube was in itself a geopolitical condition of the Romanian state. “The territorial integration of the Romanian State, in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century was determined, for the most part, by the Danube.”⁸⁹



Notes

1. George Vâlsan, “Dunărea,” *Buletinul Societății Regale Române de Geografie* (Bucharest) 54 (1935): 40.
2. S. Mehedinți, *Opere complete*, vol. 1, *Geographica, Partea a doua* (Bucharest: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1943), 47.
3. Ovidiana Bulumac, *Infrastructură și societate: Considerente teoretice și studii de caz* (Bucharest: Editura Etnologică, 2018), 32.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 32–33.
6. Ibid., 33.
7. Ibid., 32.
8. Ibid., 42–43.
9. Ibid., 43–49.
10. Ibid., 50.
11. Ibid., 52–53.
12. Ibid., 34–41.
13. Ibid., 34.
14. Emil Țircomnicu, “Comunitățile românești din dreapta Dunării,” *Geopolitica* (Bucharest) 1, 1 (2002): 5.
15. N. Iorga, *Chestiunea Dunării (Istorie a Europei Răsăritene în legătură cu această chestie): Lecții ținute la Școala de Războiu. Tipărite după notele stenografice ale d-lui H. Stahl, pentru folosul elevilor săi* (Vălenii de Munte: Editura Societății “Neamul Românesc,” 1913), 7.
16. Ibid., 4.
17. Ibid., 5.
18. Mehedinți, 158.
19. Vâlsan, “Dunărea,” 46.
20. The route includes the rivers Rhine and Main, the Main–Danube Canal, the Danube, and the Danube–Black Sea Canal.
21. Info available at <http://www.murfatlarorasul.ro/atracție/canalul-dunare-marea-neagra>.
22. Mehedinți, 158.
23. Ibid., 47.

24. Vâlsan, "Dunărea," 46.
25. Ibid.
26. Iorga, 1.
27. Ibid., 7.
28. Vâlsan, "Dunărea," 43.
29. Mehedinți, 181.
30. Redacția, "Cuvânt înainte," *Geopolitica și Geoistoria: Revista română pentru Sudestul european* (Bucharest) 1, 1 (1941): 3–4.
31. Vâlsan, "Dunărea," 43.
32. Iorga, 8–9.
33. Mehedinți, 37.
34. George Vâlsan, *Conștiință națională și geografie* (1919), afterword by Emil Țîrcomnicu (Bucharest: Editura Etnologică, 2006), 32.
35. Ibid.
36. Mehedinți, 150.
37. Vâlsan, "Dunărea," 47.
38. Gheorghe Brătianu, "Geopolitica, factor educativ și național," *Geopolitica și Geoistoria: Revista română pentru Sudestul european* 1, 1 (1941): 16.
39. Ibid.
40. Vâlsan, "Dunărea," 42.
41. Mehedinți, 181.
42. Iorga, 10.
43. Ibid., 5.
44. George Vâlsan, "Românii din Serbia," *Buletinul Societății Regale Române de Geografie* 56 (1937): 6.
45. C. Constante and A. Golopenția, *Românii din Timoc*, vol. 1 (Timișoara: Marineasa, 2008), X–XI.
46. Vâlsan, "Românii din Serbia," 14.
47. Apud Brătianu, 13.
48. Nicolae Marin-Dunăre, "Grupul etnic românesc din Jugoslavia: Rezultatele anchetelor efectuate în lagărele de prizonieri," *Geopolitica și Geoistoria: Revista română pentru Sudestul european* 2, 1 (1942): 78.
49. Vâlsan, *Conștiință națională și geografie*, 34.
50. Ibid., 11–13.
51. Ibid., 17–18.
52. Ibid., 15.
53. Ibid., 31.
54. Ibid.
55. Mehedinți, 181.
56. Vâlsan, "Dunărea," 44.
57. Vâlsan, "Românii din Serbia," 15.
58. Mehedinți, 36.
59. Iorga, 16.
60. Radu Baltasiu and Ovidiana Bulumac, *Istoria socială: Actualitate și problematică* (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2016), 150–151.

61. Mehedinți, 71–72.
62. Baltasiu and Bulumac, 151–152.
63. George Vâlsan, “Evoluția statului român în cadrul său geografic,” *Buletinul Societății Regale Române de Geografie* 56 (1937): 20–37, 25.
64. Mehedinți, 182.
65. Iorga, 170–180.
66. Ibid., 181–190.
67. Mehedinți, 182.
68. Vâlsan, “Dunărea,” 43.
69. Radu Baltasiu and Ovidiana Bulumac, eds., *Fractured Modernities: Elites, Romania and ‘Europe’* (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2014).
70. Corneliu Motoc, “Istoria Comisiei Europene a Dunării,” *Historia* (Bucharest), <http://historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/istoria-comisiei-europene-a-dunarii>.
71. Mehedinți, 182–183.
72. Ibid., 76.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 77.
76. Vâlsan, “Dunărea,” 49.
77. Ibid., 152.
78. Ibid., 49.
79. Mehedinți, 154.
80. Ibid.
81. Vâlsan, “Dunărea,” 50–51.
82. Mehedinți, 78–79.
83. Ibid., 80.
84. Vâlsan, “Dunărea,” 52–53.
85. Mehedinți, 78.
86. Ibid., 79.
87. Vâlsan, “Dunărea,” 53.
88. N. Al. Rădulescu, “Între Dunăre și Mare—simple observări,” *Analele Dobrogei* (Cernăuți) 10, 1–12 (1929): 262–268, 266.
89. Mehedinți, 152.

Abstract

The Danube, an Element of the Modern Romanian Statehood:
A Discussion on Geography, History and Identity

The article focuses on the importance of the Danube River in the unification and modernization of the Romanian state, using a multidisciplinary approach. Thus, using geographical, sociological, ethnopolitical and geoeconomic arguments, the axial character of the river is outlined, relevant for the formation of the Romanian people, along both its banks.

Keywords

Danube, modernity, Romanian state, axis, sociology of infrastructure