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THE GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOSTRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE DANUBE IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN SECURITY

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Abstract: *The work aims to make a contribution in the vast field of the concept of geopolitical system, applied to the geopolitics of the Danube. The location of the Danube basin within the European Union has made it possible to redefine the regional cooperation of the riparian states on the coordinates of Community policies and instruments. EU strategists for the Danube region highlight the strategic and economic stakes of the Danube, the emphasis being placed on achieving more efficient connections for transport, trade and energy.*

Keywords: geopolitical system, Danube Region, Danube Strategy, navigation artery

1. Introduction

In the context of European security, solving the complex problems involved in the Danube system, involves regional economic cooperation measures at European level, specific to the trends in the region. From this perspective, geopolitics brings a plus of information for the elaboration of a conduct in the Danube policy. In the case of Danube geostrategy, it emphasizes measures capable of ensuring security, protection, influence, domination, or other advantages in the geographical area of strategic importance determined by the Danube basin.

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2. Geopolitics of the Danube in the current context

The Danube crosses Romania on an area of 1075 kilometers. It represents the second natural element, along with the Carpathian Mountains, which mark the configuration of Romania. Therefore, our country is also defined as a Carpathian-Danubian country. "The Danube is more important for Romania than for other countries it crosses, because on the territory of our country it flows into the Black Sea. Therefore, the mouths of the Danube represent a very important strategic point for the control of the Black Sea, the second after the Bosporus and the Dardanelles" [1].

2.1. Strategic relevance of the region from the mouths of the Danube

The geostrategic importance of the region has been recognized since antiquity, a proof being the existence of Roman fortresses and Greek colonies near the deltaic area. The significance of the mouths of the Danube was preserved during the Byzantine era, largely due to the intense commercial traffic and navigation in this space. Later, the strategic position of the Danube Delta and the Black Sea makes this region one of the most dynamic centers of international trade. As part of the Ottoman Empire, the Danube Delta will increase its geostrategic importance. Maritime and land-based trade transforms the region into a transit zone for

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merchants from the Balkan Peninsula and the Baltic Sea area.
In the 18th century, the Danube Delta becomes the object of the strategic ambitions of several European powers, and the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century represent the period of maximum strategic regional relevance of the Delta region.
After the Second World War, the geostrategic importance of the Deltaic area at European level diminished, the mouths of the Danube and the Black Sea basin being considered, for almost half a century, an enclosed space, controlled by the Soviet Union. In history, the major struggle between the powers that met on this territory was fought for the dominion of the mouths of the Danube.
Only after Romania's accession to NATO and, subsequently, to the EU, that the Danube Delta region will regain its strategic significance, becoming again a border area between two geopolitical spheres. Although the commercial importance of the area has decreased considerably compared to other historical periods, the navigation on the Danube losing ground to other modes of transport, the relevance of the area for regional security and not only has become again a topic of debate at European level.
Developments in contemporary history have brought about significant changes for the states of the Danube region. After successive enlargement waves of the European Union in 2004 and 2007, the Danube basin became a Community area, which created new opportunities for transnational cooperation in order to make better use of the economic, energy and social potential represented by the Danube area.

2.2. Brief description of the Danube river basin

The Danube is an important access route for the European Union to the states of the wider Black Sea region, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The predominant role of the Danube from a geopolitical point of view bears the imprint of interconnectivity, representing an axis of communication, not only for trade and the economy, but also for European political and cultural values.
The Danube crosses the central area of Europe, making through the two canals Rhine - Main - Danube and Danube - Black Sea the connection between the port of Rotterdam (North Sea) and the port of Constanţa (Black Sea). Although conceived and realized as two distinct works, the Danube-Black Sea Canal, put into operation in 1984 and the Rhine-Main Danube Canal, given in functioning in 1992, it forms *the navigable artery of the Danube*.
Through the realization of these two canals, the Danube-Rhine navigable artery has become an interdependent ensemble, whose impact exceeds the limits of the riparian countries and is part of it as a strategy factor at European and even world level" [2].
We can analyze the navigable artery of the Danube as a dynamic geographical space, because its evolution and viability are determined both by the changes occurring within it and by its relations with the environment; it is an open system in which internal processes are in direct interrelationship with the environment. "Thus, even for a partial analysis, the navigable artery of the Danube must be considered as a whole, as an interdependent ensemble resulting from the realization of the two channels" [3].
A first result of the systemic Gods analyses is the realization of the river link between the Black Sea and the North Sea, the port of Rotterdam with the port of Constanţa. Thus, the countries of Central Europe can have direct access to the Black Sea and, from there, to the Suez Canal. The new commercial route, the Suez-Central Europe Channel via Constanţa, compared to the old route (the one that crosses the entire Mediterranean Sea and bypasses the Iberian Peninsula), presents the advantage of significantly shortening the distance to be covered, including the associated costs. In addition, "the ports of the Black Sea and those of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea have the most favorable position in relation

to the Suez Canal for the routes of the Indian Ocean and the Far East" [1].
From the perspective of the diversity of the areas it covers, "The Danube is divided into three sectors:
• *The upper sector or the alpine sector* of the Danube, from the springs to Bratislava/ Vienna, is typically mountainous.
• *The middle or Pannonian sector*, from Bratislava to Baziaş.
• *The lower or Carpathian-Balkan sector,* from Bazias to the mouth, has a length of 1075 km. This sector is the most important for Romania, because, throughout this route, the river wets the land of our country" [4].
"The Danube separates Balkan Europe from the Central-Eastern Europe to which Romania also belongs. All are in contrast between the two great divisions: the more mountainous relief, the pre-Mediterranean climate, as well as the flora and fauna, are the main characters of the Balkan Peninsula while in Central Europe we have various landforms, with a large percentage of lowlands, rich loess blankets, continental climate of Danubian type" [1].
The Danube Delta represents a significant area from a geostrategic point of view and with a special relevance for the national security of Romania. Located on the territory of Romania and Ukraine, at the confluence with the Black Sea, the Danube Delta is a natural border for Romania, the European Union and NATO. From the point of view of security, the Delta area represents a real challenge, being a relatively permeable space, which requires special measures of surveillance and defense of the territory and of the critical infrastructures located in the region.
From the physical-geographical point of view, the Delta is divided transversely on the arms of the river into two major sub regions: the river delta and the maritime delta. The river delta occupies over 65% of the total area of the delta. It should also be noted that the three main canals – Chilia, Sulina and Sfântu Gheorghe – are the main river transport routes that ensure the connection of the localities in the Danube Delta with the rest of Tulcea County.

3. EU Strategy for the Danube Region

The Danube Region "is an area defined by the river basin of the Danube, largely on the territory of the European Union (EU). Geographically, it refers to: Germany (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), Austria, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (regions along the Danube)" [5].
The EU Strategy for the Danube Region is complementary to the EU Black Sea Synergy and the EU Strategy for the Black Sea Region, with an interdependence between many of the priority projects carried out under the aegis of the three community cooperation formats. According to the constituent Community documents, the Danube region is a functional area defined by the River Basin of the Danube. With more than 100 million people and constituting the fifth largest part of the EU's surface, the Danube region is becoming vital for Europe. In other words, the Danube basin possesses a geostrategic capital essential for achieving the Union's long-term objectives.
The European Union initiative has created the necessary Community framework to enable the specific problems faced by the riparian States to be tackled in an organized form of regional cooperation, through bodies such as the Danube Commission and the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River [6]. The strategy seeks to make use of already existing elements of cooperation by aligning efforts, in particular policies and funding.
It should also be noted that actions at Community level are complementary to national efforts, with all stakeholders being obliged to take responsibility for the projects carried out. The Commission can help by facilitating and supporting actions, but it is necessary to engage and involve

virtually all authorities, national, regional and at other levels. Moreover, the Strategy offers the possibility to extend the existing format of cooperation, in order to be able to address the priority objectives in an integrated way, aiming at developing the economic potential and improving the environmental conditions of the region. At the same time, long-term cooperation is encouraged, both between local and regional authorities, as well as between state authorities, the private sector and NGOs, by generating projects for the development of the region.

Beyond the geostrategic need to create a safe area where conflicts, marginalization and crime are properly addressed in order not to affect the stability of the Union, the primacy of geopolitical interests in the Danube region has revealed the existence of a real need to connect people, their ideas and needs, by capitalizing on research and innovation perspectives and exploiting the economic potential, ecological and energy of the Danube basin.

To sum up, the objective of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region is an integrated, concerted response to the challenges of the current security context, with the emphasis being placed on achieving more efficient connections for transport, trade and energy, coupled with realistic actions in the field of environmental management and enhanced cooperation in the field of security. For this reason, we believe that the EU Strategy for the Danube Region attests to the particular geostrategic importance that this area has for the European Union.

4. The geostrategic importance of the Danube for Romania

The EU Strategy for the Danube Region and the Regional Cooperation "offers the possibility of sustainable development of the counties in the south of Romania by diversifying the economic functions, developing the network of localities, diversifying the tourism offer, developing the transport networks, including by creating intermodal nodes, ensuring the critical infrastructure necessary for the protection of the environment in general and protection against natural risks, in particular, the valorization of the natural and cultural heritage, the enhancement of social facilities" [7]. At the same time, through the strategy's drafts, our country aims to limit the migration of the labor force, both in other areas of the country and in other countries, a stake with long-term geopolitical implications.

The four pillars of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region are of equal importance for Romania, the potential for sustainable development of the Lower Danube basin being considerable. For our country, the transformation of the Danube "into a backbone of the European space, as part of the Rhine-Danube axis" [8] would bring undeniable benefits, both economically, energetically and socially, as well as in terms of political capital and security. For these reasons, Romania has expressed its support for a sustainable economic and social development of the Danube region, placing a special emphasis on the development and implementation of adequate COMMUNITY norms on environmental protection. Given that our country manages most of the Danube Delta reserve, which has been on the list of UNESCO sites defined as cultural heritage of humanity since 1991, we consider that Romania's approach within the European Union Strategy is rational and pragmatic, demonstrating the strategic importance that the Romanian state attaches to the Danube River.

As regards the opportunities offered by the river navigation sector, Romania can make more efficient use of the Danube's backbone to boost the economic development of port cities and to reducing existing disparities compared to other states in the region. Traditionally, the Danube and its secondary arms have been one of Romania's main transport routes. "Although at present the share of inland waterway transport is low compared to other modes of transport, there is a very high potential for

development, with river transport not being used at full capacity" [8]. There are several arguments in favour of the development of this sector: firstly, inland waterway transport is an efficient and economical mode of transport, suitable for long distances and appreciable quantities of goods; secondly, it is a less polluting mode of transport.

According to the technical navigation parameters, "The Danube allows, on the Romanian sector, from Brăila (km 175) to the Black Sea, on the Sulina branch, the access of sea-going vessels up to 25,000 TEU (partially unloaded) in the ports of Sulina, Tulcea, Galaţi and Brăila. From Brăila upstream, the technical navigation parameters allow the access of inland navigation vessels in 29 ports, of which the most important are: Moldova Veche, Orşova, Drobeta Turnu Severin, Calafat, Bechet, Turnu Măgurele, Zimnicea, Giurgiu, Olteniţa, Călăraşi, Cernavodă. The Romanian ports on the Danube are connected to the national or European networks of roads and railways and the existing port facilities and those that will be developed allow them to be transformed into main logistical hubs for multimodal transport" [8].

Last but not least, we believe that Romania can play an essential role in strengthening the European Union's dialogue with third countries in the Danube basin, implicitly facilitating the extension of values and European standards in the immediate neighbourhood. The Romanian state can promote European interests in the region, both within the community format of cooperation and independently, within bilateral projects. It is obvious, however, that the EU Strategy for the Danube Region contributes to facilitating the connection of the Union, and implicitly of our country, with the extended Black Sea and Asia area Central, representing a particularly effective foreign policy instrument. On the other hand, this last aspect can be not only an opportunity, but also a challenge for Romania, because it tests our country's capacity to improve control over the eastern external border (the eastern border of both NATO and the EU) and stop potential external threats.

In conclusion, it can be said that, for Romania, the Danube represents not only a transport axis, but also a cohesion element, with a structuring potential on the region, favoring strong cultural, educational and business interactions. From this point of view, we consider that the location of the Delta and the mouths of the Danube on the territory of Romania is a strategic advantage insufficiently exploited at present, which could strengthen our country's role as an important geopolitical actor in the region.

5. Conclusions

The Danube has always provided favorable premises for cooperation between riparian states, and for the Danube Region it has been a factor of territorial stability and comfort. The Danube enables the riparian states to be able to make easier use of the main maritime routes, to be able to carry out activities of transporting goods more cheaply, thus facilitating the competitiveness of economic activities. The Danube is part of a much more complex geopolitical and geo-economics equation and can provide Europe with the connection of energy resources in Central Asia (Caucasus) and the link with the Planetary Ocean.

For the European Union, the Danube Region is of particular importance due to the large number of countries that are depleted by the Danube, but also through the direct exit to the Black Sea. The Danube connects the North Sea and the port of Rotterdam, the largest port of the European Union, to the Black Sea and the port of Constanţa, the tenth largest port of the European Union.

The Danube Region plays an important role in diversifying the European Union's energy supply sources. Also, the Danube basin will greatly influence the agricultural and rural development in the region.

For the Danube Region, there have been no challenges to European security in the context of the war in Ukraine: migration, transport connectivity, energy, and food security. These challenges require closer cooperation between the countries of the Danube Region in order to jointly address the threats they face. An important role is played by strengthening economic ties, helping the export of cereals from blocked Ukrainian ports towards eliminating a potential food crisis. There is also a need for a common response, solidarity of the states in the region to the threats that have arisen and the use of new opportunities to strengthen the macro-region.

The economic development in the Danube Region, complementary to the other measures resulted under the Three Seas Initiative and the Eastern Partnership, offers great chances for this region to become a source of security for the EU and NATO.

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