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Development of Tourism in the Danube Tourist Region of Bulgaria

Abstract: The Danube tourist region of Bulgaria consists of the Bulgarian section of the Danube River, adjoining islands, and territories south of the river. It is one of the newly-formed Bulgarian tourist regions. The aim of this article is to characterize tourist functions of the comparatively badly-studied Bulgarian section of the Danube River and the Danube tourist region. In order to achieve the aim, the article considers the following problems: territorial definition, tourist and resource potential check; characterization of the contemporary development of tourism; problems and prospects for its future progress.

Key words: Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside, Danube tourist region, development of tourism

Introduction

The Danube is one of the biggest rivers in Europe. With the length of 2,888 km it passes through or is a border line for the following countries: Germany, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine. In connection with the Rhine-Main-Danube canal, it flows through the continent and connects most of the European countries. It is an economic factor, energy resource, trade route, historical eyewitness, and a factor that has influenced the identity of nations (Skoff 2010). Its role in tourism has also grown apparently in the last decades. The Danube Tourist Commission was established as early as 1970. Today Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, and Moldova are among the member states of the commission. Bulgaria and Ukraine have not joined the commission yet. One of the main goals of the organization is to turn the Danube region into a leading European tourist destination. The tourist product is based not only on the river and water but on population, cities, culture, art, and sightseeing, opportunities for sports, entertainment, and recreation. The basic starting points for cruise tourism on the Danube are Pasau (66% of the

departures), Vienna (7%), Budapest (7%), Nuremberg (4%), Lynz, Bucharest, and the delta (3%), etc. There are passengers from various nations but the number of German, American, British, French, Scandinavian, Dutch, Austrian, Italian, Spanish, and Australian tourists prevail over the others. The riverside is visited mostly by tourists from Germany, the United States, Benelux, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, UK, Japan, and Southern Europe (Skoff 2010).

This research examines the Danube tourist region of Bulgaria. It studies conditions and perspectives for development of tourism in this region.

The aim of this article is to characterize tourist functions of the comparatively badly-studied Bulgarian section of the Danube River. In order to accomplish the aim the following problems have to be solved:

- territorial definition;
- tourist and resource potential check;
- characterization of the contemporary development of tourism;
- tracking and preparing recommendations for a better development in the future.

Territorial Scope

Bulgarian section of the Danube River is part of the lower course of the river. It stretches from the mouth of the Timok River (the northernmost part of Bulgarian and Serbian border) to Silistra. It is 470 km long and encompasses 48 islands in the river. The Danube has both dividing and integrating functions. On one hand it is a border river for Bulgaria because 4/5 of the northern state border follows the river. On the other the Danube is one of the most important European transport corridors (№7). It connects Bulgaria with Central and Western Europe. Due to the significant water resources and cheap waterway, here are located considerable production capacities, irrigation systems for the agriculture, as well as two duty-free zones (in Vidin and in Russe). There is only one bridge crossing the river, it is situated close to Russe, and is called transport corridor №9. This makes transport and communication with the neighbouring Romania and Central Europe difficult. A second bridge is being built close to Vidin. It is called transport corridor №4 and its aim is to facilitate the communication with Central and Western Europe.

The Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside encompasses those territories of the country, the social and economical development of which is directly or indirectly, in one or other aspect, connected with the use of the river. The project SEE AF/A/653/4.2/X *Transnational Strategy for the Sustainable Territorial*

Development of the Danube Area with Special Regard to Tourism (DATOURWAY) regards the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside as being formed of all administrative regions that have a direct contact with the Danube River (Vidin, Montana, Vratsa, Plevna, Veliko Tarnovo, Ruse, Silistra) and the Razgrad region, which is only 20 km away from the riverside and its regional connections with the regions of Ruse and Silistra are well manifested (fig. 1). According to this definition the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside covers the biggest part of the territory of Northern Bulgaria, 25.1 % of the territory of Bulgaria, 20.4 % from the population of the country, and creates 16.9 % of the GDP. Therefore compared to the other regions of Bulgaria this is a more sparsely populated territory with a slow social and economic development.

According to the given definition the territorial scope of the **Danube tourist region** coincides partially with the territory of the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside. The territory of the Danube tourist region (fig. 2) is smaller and generally excludes the mountainous and foothill territories situated in the southern lands of the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside lying relatively away from the river. This is considered appropriate from a tourist and geographical point of view. Its transformation into an independent tourist region is based entirely on the territorial unity

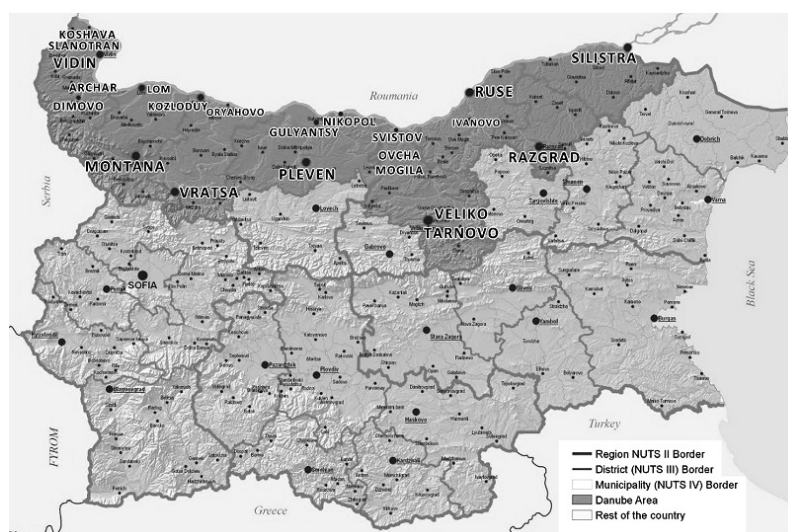


Fig. 1. Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside

Source: Project SEE AF/A/653/4.2/X *Transnational Strategy for the Sustainable Territorial Development of the Danube Area with Special Regard to Tourism (DATOURWAY)*, 2010

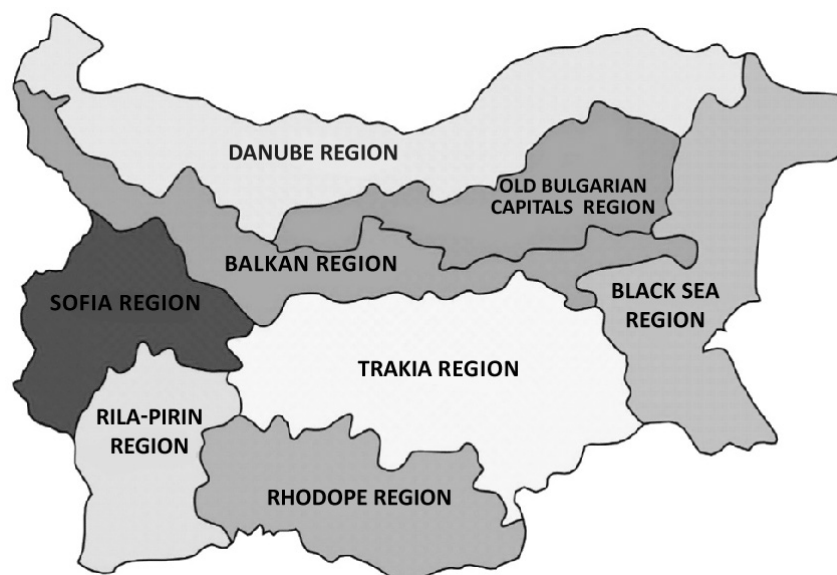


Fig. 2. Tourist regions in Bulgaria
Source: State Agency for Tourism (in liquidation)

of natural, social, and economical objects and activities of a well manifested tourist character (*National Tourism Development Strategy of Bulgaria*). Tourist zoning operating now is not a total one. According to the vice minister of economy, energy, and tourism, Ivo Marinov, it is still not clear what should be the borders of

the Danube tourist region that will be specified in the new Tourism law. Probably the region will encompass all the settlements on the shore or near the river or will be divided into sections. The Danube tourist region is one of the newly-formed tourist regions in Bulgaria. Due to this it can be classified as developing.

Tourist Resource Potential

The Danube River was the leading factor for establishing the Danube tourist region and that is why we should turn our attention to other natural and tourist resources. The river provides conditions for the development of water sports like rowing, fishing, yachting, as well as cruises. However, these opportunities are rarely used for the needs of tourism. There are mineral water springs near Vidin, Koshava, Slanotrún, Ovcha Mogila and other places in the inner parts of the region. They have small output and predominantly local significance. The only SPA centre is in Ovcha Mogila. The great number of unique wet ecosystems, formed along the river, islands, and banks are interesting from a natural cognitive tourism point of view. There are a number of protected areas established in order to conserve them. Among these protected areas are 2 natural parks (Persina and Rusenski Lom), 3 reserves (Kitka, Milka and Bely Lom), 3 supported reserves (Srebarna, Persinski Blata, and

Ibrisha), as well as many protected places and natural monuments. The reserves Kitka (25.4 ha) and Milka (30 ha) are the smallest in Bulgaria. Supported reserves Persinski Blata and Srebarna are protected areas with an international significance.

Srebarna is under the protection of UNESCO. The territory of the reserve is 902.1 ha while the lake takes more than 2/3 of it. Srebarna owes its fame mostly to birds and especially to the colony of Dalmatian pelicans. Among the protected birds are also cormorants, ferruginous ducks, different types of herons, etc.

Rusenski lom natural park is the northernmost natural park in Bulgaria. It was established in 1970 and was considered a national park from 2002. Its territory is 3.408 ha. Its relief is characteristic for its specific and attractive forms, e.g., the most picturesque canyons in Bulgaria. Meanders of Rusenski Lom River and the neighbouring heights complement the



Photo 1. Srebarna lake (nearby Silistra)
Photo by Vanya Vasileva

specificities of the landscape. There are more than 200 caves and almost 70% of the territory of the park is covered with forests. Rivers and fish are favourable for birds. One can see 174 species of birds, 165 of which are under the protection of the Bern convention.

Rusenski Lom Natural Park owes its characteristics not only to its nature but to its cultural heritage, too. Medieval town of Cherven and Rock-Hewn Churches of Ivanovo natural architectural reserves can be found here. Both of them entered the World Heritage List of UNESCO. The total number of cultural monuments on the territory of the park is 125.

There are different types of tourism but a priority is given to the visits of historical objects and bird observation. The accommodation facilities consist of 2 chalets.

Persina Natural Park covers many Danubian islands including the biggest Bulgarian island Belene and the adjoining riverbank. One of the principal aims of the environmental protection there is the restoration of the floodplain forests and wetlands. This is the reason for participating in the ecological network NATURA 2000. The principal conservation value of the park depends on the existence of natural

swamp. That is one of the 50 wetlands in Bulgaria and one of the 12 wetlands situated on the Bulgarian part of the Danube river. Wetland flora such as different types of willows, poplars, lilacs, etc. is specific because of these peculiarities. There is a great variety of birds living here; their number is more than 100 and most of them are wetland birds.

The park is not exploited very well yet and is not popular tourist attraction.

The project *SEE AF/A/653/4.2/X Transnational Strategy for the sustainable territorial development of the Danube area with special regard to tourism (DATOURWAY)* has performed a good valorization of the anthropogenic tourist resources and it will be utilized here. The Danube riverside has an interesting historical background and because of it the cultural and historical heritage offers a substantial tourist resources. Some of the key monuments having cultural and historical character are concentrated in small areas were granted the status of archaeological, architectural and historical preservations. They are considered a basic tourist resource in the scope of the Danube riverside and are represented in table 1.

Table 1. Localization of the architectural, historical, and archaeological preservations that are considered cultural monuments in the scope of the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside

Region	Municipality	Preservation
Vidin	Dimovo	Roman and Late Roman settlement of Ratsiaria near Archar village
Vratsa	Kozloduy	Roman fortress Augusta in Kaleto near Hurlets village
Ruse	Ivanovo	Rock-Hewn Churches near Ivanovo village and the adjoining land
Ruse	Ivanovo	Medieval town of Cherven
Silistra	Silistra	Ancient settlement Dorostorum-Drustur lying in the territory of Silistra
Pleven	Gulyantsi	Territory of the roman town Ulpia Eskus near Gigen village

Source: Register of the cultural monuments in Bulgaria. Ministry of Culture

The towns along the Danube, where the Roman *limes* (*Danubius limes Romana*) were situated, developed rapidly since the time the Danube riverside has been part of the Roman Empire. Situated on the outskirts of the Roman Empire these towns had predominantly defence functions and were turned into fortresses. Today on the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside, there are many ruins of Roman fortresses, e.g. *Bononia* located very close to today's Vidin remnants of Roman towns, e.g. *Nikopolis ad Istrum* founded by emperor Trajan, or *Nove*

(Svishtov municipality). Foundations of basilicas in the ancient town of Storgozia from which Pleven originated are preserved from Roman time. In today's Ruse one can see the remains of the headquarters of the Roman fleet *Seksaginta Pristas*.

There are medieval monuments of cultural and historical significance that are preserved and which signify the flourishing state of its culture. Such are the medieval fortress Vidin and Dorostum-Drustur (in Silistra). The biggest genuine fortress remaining from the time



Photo. 2. Baba Vida fortress (nearby Vidin).
Photo by Vanya Vasileva

of the Second Bulgarian State Cherven has a great cultural and historical importance. The fortress can be found in Dve Mogili municipality, in Ruse district. All these monuments have a national significance and can provoke the interest of tourists.

There are valuable monuments of the material civilization, art, and learning preserved from the epoch of the Revival. In Svishtov there are such gems as one of a kind church with spinning columns, the cathedral Sveta Troitsa built by Kolio Fitcheto, and the old clock tower. In Ruse one can see the remnants of the fortress

gate *Kontukkapya*, the Levent fortress as well as a number of houses from the period of the Bulgarian national revival. Ruse has 267 buildings that are classified as cultural monuments. Objects of cultural and historical heritage of the recent history such as the Pleven Panorama, known as *Pleven Epopee 1877*, mausoleum and ossuary, museum of general Skobelev, *The liberation of Pleven 1877* museum, Pantheon of the writers of the Bulgarian national revival in Ruse, Baba Tonka's museum house, and others are also interesting to the tourists.

The State of Tourism Nowadays

As it comes to tourism big rivers are usually considered important for the development of cruise tourism. "River cruises facilitate the establishment of tourist infrastructure on the rivers and can help for the improvement of the status of harbours in bad condition and can favour the formation of new tourist routes (Воскресенский, 2008.). Harbours in the Bulgarian part of the river: Vidin, Archar, Lom, Kozloduy, Oryahovo, Nikopol, Ruse, Silistra, as well as the ferryboats Vidin-Kalafat, Oryahovo-Beket, Ruse-Gyurgevo, Silistra-Kalarash are utilized only for shipping and their

use is limited or are not used as passenger harbours at all. There is a limited number of cruise ships sailing under Bulgarian flag and they do not sail in the Bulgarian section of the river. The Bulgarian section of the river is used by foreign cruise ships but they take little advantage of tourism opportunities located on the riverside.

Table 2 presents information about the passengers who used the Bulgarian harbours on the Danube during the past three years. The information is provided on a monthly basis. There is a well demonstrated prevalence of the

Table 2. Number of passengers who used the Bulgarian river harbours on a monthly basis in the period from 2008 to 2010

MONTHS/YEARS	2008	2009	2010
I	32 836	30 105	27 548
II	38 805	31 568	28 957
III	49 456	36 630	34 482
IV	55 269	41 821	40 200
V	60 805	46 301	40 805
VI	71 574	56 145	42 947
VII	76 430	61 250	44 335
VIII	86 491	68 458	52 085
IX	67 869	55 112	44 626
X	55 466	46 925	43 049
XI	43 590	36 870	35 451
XII	37 005	32 579	32 173
TOTAL	675 596	543 764	466 658

warm part of the year. The busiest months are from April to October. The number of passengers in August is two times bigger than in January. There is a well manifested trend for a decrease in the number of passengers. In 2010 only 466.658 passengers used the Bulgarian harbours on the Danube which marks a drop of 31% in only last three years. This number is insignificant for the size of the Bulgarian section of the river and means that only 5.5% of the tourists who visited the country in 2010 came through the Danube. It signifies the limited tourist functions of the river which is to a great extent in contrast with the existing tourist resource potential.

Table 3 presents information about the nationalities of visitors arriving through the Danube. One can draw a conclusion that the variety is restricted to 5 nationalities and there is a significant imbalance between them. Romanians take the leading place. They use all 4 ferryboats that are in operation. There is a relatively low number of arrivals of Germans, Serbs, and Ukrainians. The number of Bulgarians travelling between the harbours using water transport is also insignificant. The lack of passengers from the rest of the countries situated along the Danube is also due to the undeveloped cruise tourism in the Bulgarian section of the river.

Table 3. Distribution of tourists using the Bulgarian harbours on the Danube by land

COUNTRIES	NUMBER	SHARE (%)
UNSPECIFIED	299	0,05
AUSTRIA	0	0
BULGARIA	1 778	0,4
GERMANY	14 533	3,1
CROATIA	0	0
HUNGARY	0	0
THE NETHERLANDS	0	0
ROMANIA	436 729	93,6
RUSSIA	0	0
SLOVAKIA	0	0
UKRAINE	2 153	0,5
SERBIA	11 166	2,4
OTHER	0	0
TOTAL	466 658	100

Source: Abstract of a Bulletin Analysis 1/11 Ministry of Transport, Information Technology and Communications

In order to characterize the modern state of tourism we will use data about the regions in the territorial scope of the Bulgarian parts of the Danube riverside (table 4). It should be taken into consideration that the figures below are smaller when it comes to the Danube tourist region as a part of the Danube riverside.

Despite the fact that according to this definition the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside covers about $\frac{1}{4}$ of Bulgaria it comprises only 8% of accommodation facilities of the country and 4.7% of beds in accommodation facilities. All the regions of the territory of the Bulgarian Danube

riverside, apart from Veliko Tarnovo and Ruse, are among those Bulgarian regions that have the smallest number of accommodation facilities and beds. The region provided lodgings to 7.8% of the accommodated people and only 3.1% of the accommodated foreigners. The short term (1 to 3 nights) accommodation predominates seriously. Due to this the region has only 4% of the overnight accommodations in the country and only 1.2% those spent by foreigners. Income from tourism (accommodation) is not big and constitutes about 3.7% national earnings from tourism. Only 1.4% of the income from foreigners is obtained in this region.

Table 4. Conditions and utilization of tourist accommodation facilities in the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside (2009)

DISTRICTS	Number of accommodation facilities	Number of beds	Accommodated people	Accommodated foreigners	Overnight accommodation	Overnight accommodation of foreigners	Income from overnight accommodation (thousand levs)	Income from overnight accommodation of foreigners (thousand levs)
Vidin	38	758	28 967	4 257	48 492	16 846	1,865	753
Montana	26	1 355	23 632	2 364	55 243	4 565	1,354	205
Vratsa	27	1 869	25 745	3 187	54 674	9 154	1,781	432
Pleven	13	1 161	47 684	5 873	73 459	13 579	2,939	826
Veliko Tarnovo	86	4 883	114 124	20 318	189 660	29 598	7,093	1,622
Ruse	50	1 903	90 930	18 187	130 607	31 031	5,674	1,625
Razgrad	20	831	14 961	2 117	23 228	4 244	853	173
Silistra	22	702	21 349	3 694	33 015	8 244	1,579	482
Total	282	13 462	343 424	59 997	608 378	117 261	23,138	6,118
Share of the total figures for Bulgaria %	8,0	4,7	7,8	3,1	4,0	1,2	3,7	1,4

Source: Bulgarian National Statistical Institute

The State Agency for Tourism (in liquidation) (2008) claims that the cultural and historical tourism represent a basic type of tourism which is a priority for the Danube tourist region. The following types of tourism are pointed as supplementary: river cruises, bird watching, wine, and adventure tourism. Hunting and spa tourism can also be developed although not as a priority and only in some parts of the region. The best decision is to classify the cruises on the river which can be developed only in this region as a priority type of tourism. The resources available for cultural and historical tourism in the region are considerable, but this type of tourism can be developed successfully in all regions of the country and cannot be taken as specific. Bird watching can be developed very well in wet areas and natural parks. Wine tourism can rely on the great grape massifs and the specific local grape varieties for instance *gumza* wine and red muscatel wine. The opportunities for developing yachting and other types of water sports are still not paid enough attention to. The organization of regular and incidental events or the so called event tourism is weak.

People should develop, form, and advertise a regional tourist product accenting the river tourism, i.e. it should be a combination of tourist activities bound in one way or the other with the Danube.

The given data signifies that the Bulgarian part of the Danube riverside falls behind the other parts of the country according to the development of the tourism and is one of the weakly developed tourist regions in Bulgaria. The region has a low popularity among foreign visitors who prefer the Black Sea coast and the mountainous territories. The Bulgarian section of the Danube is a border territory. That is why it is an object of interest of the regional development policy of the EU. It should be noted that from 2005 until now there are more than 20 projects designed on different pre-accession and structural programmes that are directly or indirectly related to the development of cultural, eco- and rural tourism in region.

Problems and Prospects of Developing Tourism in the Future

The use of the region for tourism does not correspond to its tourist resources and the opportunities it offers. Currently there are serious problems in the development of tourism in the Danube tourist region. The following ones are considered basic:

- insufficient utilization of the tourist resources
- insufficient condition of the infrastructure
- insufficient personnel capacity
- inadequate amount of information, marketing and advertising

- underestimation of the most prospective types of tourism, including cruise tourism and yachting
- considering the region more as a periphery of the country than as a tourist centre

Due to its establishment as an independent tourist region, participation in a number of projects, regional and municipal development strategies and plans including tourism, we can expect a better development of tourism in the region in the future. It will require efforts on local and national level as well as some from private and public sector. Positive results can only be expected in the long run.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, until now Bulgaria did not participate much in international cooperation on the problems of the Danube River. By waterways revitalization and joining the Danube Tourist Commission Bulgaria would gain an opportunity for establishing and applying for international initiatives, for example in the sphere of cruise tourism and yachting. These can also generate tourist flows to the interior of the Danube tourist region. These tourist

flows can take advantage of various other types of tourism, e.g. eco-tourism, bird watching, cultural and cognitive tourism, wine tourism, event tourism, etc. Utilized adequately for the improvement of the condition of tourism the unemployed potential of the Bulgarian section of the Danube River may lead to a substantial stir in the future. The main aim is to turn the developing Bulgarian part of the Danube tourist region into a developed tourist region.

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