

Planning in the Danube Delta

Sfiștofca Village in C. A. Rosetti Municipality, Romania

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Sfiștofca is a remote village in the Romanian Danube Delta. It is reported to be established around 1800 by Russian fishermen from Vilkovo (Vylkove in Ukraine and Valcov in Romanian language) in the Ukrainian Danube Delta less than 15km away from Sfiștofca. The establishment of the wooden church in 1827 can be taken as an official founding date of the village. That time favourable situated at the mouth of the Kyla arm of the Danube Delta the village generated prosperity for up to 1000 people in 1900 (History of Dobrodgea, 1904). The peripheral position was a consequence of the land locking of the place by the sediments of the Danube River. The water based traffic had to be substituted by land based traffic. During the 1950ies and early 60ies, the Sfiștofca (also named magistral) channel was built by political prisoners from Periprava with the aim to better access the reed and fish resources of the Danube Delta.

A relative high number of inhabitants of several hundreds of inhabitants can be found until the 1970ies. According to local sources, the major retreat from Sfiștofca started after a flooding during the 1970ies. Then the population of Sfiștofca gradually decreased due to the utmost peripheral position of the village in the Danube Delta. The better valorisation of fish and agricultural resources was aimed during the 70ies and 80ies and particularly targeted in the 6th (1976–80) to 8th (1981–85, 1986 to 1990). national five year central economic plan for Romania. The communist leader Nicolae Ceausescu had visited Netherlands and the Rhine Delta and wanted to stimulate a similar development and prospering in the Danube Delta as well. The wetlands should be turned into agricultural land and with increased profitability other economic sectors should manifest here. The increased level of state investment counter acted the trend of outmigration of the Danube Delta. However, while in many other locations of the Danube Delta the population increased due to better economic possibilities the population of Sfiștofca declined. The prime economic asset of the village, the access to the Black Sea and the mouth of the Kyla arm as a habitat for sturgeons got lost at the beginning of the 20th century by large quantities of transported sand.

The fall of the communist system in 1989 brought a new environmentally minded regime during the 90ies. The Danube Delta was declared a UNESCO world biosphere heritage site. A governor for the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Administration DDBRA was put in place and a set of ecological benign measures was established with the aim to ecologically restore the delta. The DDBRA is a state agency under the rule of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. More than 80% of the land is under its rule. But the 20% economically most attractive lands are owned by the provincial government of Tulcea and the 10 municipalities of the Danube Delta. The ecological regime as proposed by the government was often opposed by the local planning authorities. They need income to run their administration. The most profitable assets in possession of local authorities were licenced to rich strangers that got access to aquaculture ponds and the most productive reed harvesting areas. Despite the devotion as ecological restructuring areas the outtake of natural resources during the 1990ies was over proportional. The huge differences of interests between rich outside investors and poor local inhabitants led to severe tensions. While few locals could profit from this situation most other people lost their - mainly informal - rights like fishing or harvesting reed for family use which they had during communism. Due to lacking perspectives, many villagers, in particular the well educated ones, left the Danube Delta to economically more prospering places.

The remaining poor local population had high expectations when Romania entered the EU in 2007. In particular all kinds of eco-tourism were targeted as a means to develop. The two primary goals of the Danube Delta Regional Development Plan were poverty elimination and economic growth could not be reached (Nichersu 2015). The economic situation is worse within the Danube Delta than within the adjacent regions of Tulcea County. In Tulcea County the economic situation is again worse than in the rest of Romania and Romania is far behind the average GDP of the European Union (Worldbank 2014). The economic problems even aggravated during the first period of the European

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Union from 2007 to 2013 and most localities did not receive any project support from programs of the European Union Cohesion Fund or within the Territorial Cooperation programs (Danner et al. 2014, pp. 43, 44). The non inclusion or insufficient inclusion of locals was observed (van Asche et al., 2011). This is in line that two thirds of the allocated money of these funds in Romania was not called for projects. However, the ministers of the EU reconfirmed that a territorial cohesion of EU member states is a common goal and all of them signed the "Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020". This led to a new instrument for the program period 2014 to 2020, a so called Integrated Territorial Investment Program, ITI. The Danube Delta is thereby a selected case study (EC 2015). ITI aims the joint implementation of several EU programs and a combined investment of one billion Euro is foreseen in the Danube Delta. However, Sfiștofca village as well as the larger unit of C.A. Rosetti municipality do not qualify for EU funding as the minimum population is not reached.

While in principle we have a lot of money available, local people in remote villages and municipalities remain poor. The scale of programs and projects do not fit to practical circumstances or informal procedures at the place. There is money for large scale projects and initiatives but no money for small scale local improvement projects. Private investors can get almost every investment back if they follow the EU project guidance. But control and reimbursement procedures can stretch over many years, so that it remains still unattractive to invest. In addition many projects a business plan for the profitability of projects.

In case of Sfiștofca , the village was even considered too remote to be visited by a fact finding team of the World Bank. No one from the village or the larger municipality was involved into a broadly managed public participation process with regard to the Danube Delta Strategy. The travel to another village is considered as a high cost when the average yearly income per household is € 1.500.- with many persons far beyond this amount. Public transport worsened or does not exist any longer due to fewer people that still remained. The only remaining small store in the village closed in 2015 when the woman in charge became ill. The elementary school closed already many years before indicating that the village is slowly dying.

While all descriptions so far point to a neglect and a desperate situation Sfiștofca has several particularities that few other places have. It belongs to the religious minority of Russian Old believers - a group of believers scattered around the world - which has plans to make Sfiștofca a holy place of pilgrimage even if the remaining population should have left the village. Another hopeful initiative came from artists living in Tulcea, Bucharest and abroad, forming the Sfiștofca Art Association. They discovered the remoteness of the place as a source of inspiration and use the place for workshops. During the last 10 years art films and photos or documentations were produced and brought the place some fame in insider circles (Gheorghiu 2014). Annual workshops that involve the local population of the municipality are held in Sfiștofca . Yet another initiative is university cooperation to support the local population by student projects. Several universities, such as Ion Mincu University of Architecture and Urban Planning Bucharest, the National University of Arts Bucharest, Ovidius University Constanta, Technische Universität Wien started a fruitful cooperation since 2009. Occasionally this network is supported by members of other universities from outside Europe, under them Keio or Kobe universities from Japan. The direct relation of students, locals and local decision makers is fruitful for all parts. The student projects are freely chosen by students and inspired by the locals in need for it. Under them a small scale freshwater supply in response to the observed salinization process with a ground water pump; plans to marketize medical plants, horticultural products, honey from the Danube Delta; plans for youth camp and nature outdoor learning exercises; design proposals for nature near designs of tourist shelters and fishermen cottages (Voica et al. 2015).

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