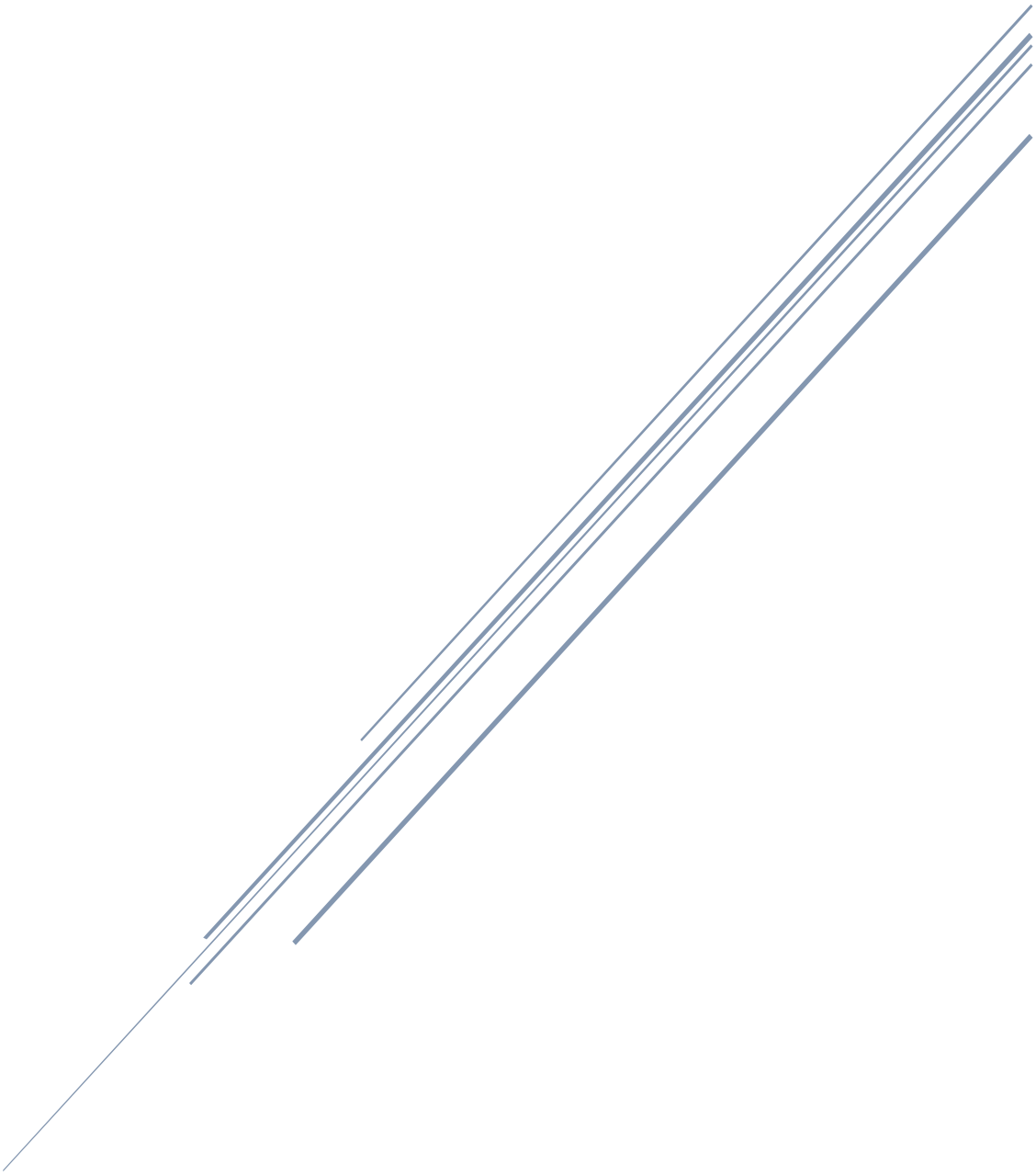
COMBINING INFRASTRUCTURE AND TOURISM FOR THE FUTURE OF THE DANUBE DELTA COMMUNITIES



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EX Development and Decline in the Danube Delta, 2017S – final report

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Introduction

It takes the Danube 2860 long kilometers and ten countries to make its way from the Black Forest Mountains in Germany and finally create a spectacular, 4,152 km^2 vast, delta before merging with the Black Sea. But although it has been ten years since Romania's accession to the European Union – a worldwide symbol of prosperity – the lives of the people in the "Danube Delta" Biosphere Reserve and UNESCO World Heritage Site are a very long way from prosperous and not nearly as spectacular as the nature in the area. In fact, a simple look at a Eurostat map[1] will reveal that the eastern you go along the Danube from its springs to its mouths, the poorer the region becomes, thus making Romania, and especially the Tulcea county one of the poorest regions in the EU.[2] Ukraine (non-EU member) shares a small area of the "Danube Delta" Biosphere Reserve with Romania but it in turn ranks second-lowest in wealth in whole Europe[3]. In this ranking, Ukraine is outclassed only by the Republic of Moldova, which is however too only about 40km beeline away from Tulcea, the main city of the area and gateway to the Danube Delta.

Altogether you are facing one of the poorest areas in Europe, whose retrogressive development is hampered among other factors by population decline, lack of initiative of the ones still living there, heavy regulations regarding environment imposed by the Biosphere Reserve and the EU, difficulty in accessing funding for development, and shortage of financial capital among the population itself. Most of the problems find themselves in a vicious cycle which can be very difficult to break respecting the current (and legitimate) laws and regulations, so only small and careful steps are to be made.

Current situation

As noticed first-handedly in the excursion, the situation in the field is far from being one congruent with the beauty, complexity and importance of the area, as well as with standards of the European Union or even the 21st century.

Tourism is one of the only sources of income of the locals in the delta, along with activities in the primary sector, such as stockbreeding, fishing and limited agriculture. A main problem about it seems to be the fast tourism that only targets the best accessible localities in the Delta, mostly situated on the Sulina arm of the Danube, or even villages on the periphery of the Biosphere Reserve, southeast of Tulcea, which benefit from easy "mainland" access and fewer ecological restrictions. While trying to spend as little time as possible on vacation (which can sometimes be arduous in the delta; the ferry trip from Tulcea to Sulina alone takes about four and a half hours for 70km), people will also spend less money in the area, which in turn means less money for potential investments for the

[1] GDP at regional level. URL: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/GDP_at_regional_level.
[2] Cum s-a schimbat harta județelor bogate în ultimele două decenii. URL: http://www.analizeeconomice.ro/2015/11/cum-s-schimbat-harta-judetelor-bogate.html
[3] Top Ten Poorest Countries in Europe – 2017 Update. URL: http://gazettereview.com/2016/02/top-ten-poorest-countries-europe/.

inhabitants and local administrations. That leads for tourism to prosper in some localities (such as the well-known Crișan), while "off the beaten track" villages like Letea still face depopulation and lack of tourists leads to closing of the few businesses that tried to be established.[4] In addition to this, tourists that come from Western Europe with cruise ships along the Danube rarely disembark, spending virtually no money for the landscape they consume. While for this particular type of tourists this is not a specific case for the Danube Delta, it does affect the local economies.

While having great potential, tourism is statistically far from what it has been in the last years of the communist regime. This might be explained by the exclusivity of the state-run tourism in those ages and also artificially lower costs practiced by the regime to lure foreign currency in Romania. Since the 90's tourism has experienced a general stagnation, with foreign visitors sometimes surpassing the local ones[5] even though the number of accommodation units has slowly but steadily grown.[6] However, like the representatives of the Danube Delta "National Institute for Research and Development" mentioned during our meeting, a large part of the tourists in the Delta are not officially declared, being accommodated as part of the black market[7], in guest house owners' efforts to avoid taxation. At the same time, tourists being held in private people's homes and campers (the majority of the tourists in the Delta[8]) are not included in these statistics.

The category of tourists that against all odds dare to venture themselves in the off-beaten-track villages often find themselves searching in vain for "official" accommodation units (they can always camp or be welcomed by the locals in their homes), shops, or paying large amounts of money on private transportation services, since public transportation has been discontinued. If they do find a place to stay, it is likely that it is not properly equipped to accommodate tourists, lacking basic services like toilets or running water.

It is no question that some people search these kinds of thrills and enjoy the rudimentary lifestyle. But another frequently overlooked aspect that hides behind the halo of the UNESCO World Heritage Site "Danube Delta" is the life of the average locals living inside the Reserve. Although they are now EU citizens, their lifestyle has hardly evolved in the past hundred years, "infrastructure" in western terms being a foreign word for the locals. Apart from the fact that every village is supplied with electricity, the project being put in place during the Communist regime, people in the delta (especially in the not so touristy places) are living in insanitary conditions, without water-toilets, sometimes without freshwater at all, which they have to transport from other places. As many as 25% of the population "do not benefit from optimal conditions of potable water supply"[9] Sewage

[4] concrete information gathered on the field
[5] compare: Tătar et al. 2017: 129 and Tulcea: Numărul turiștilor care au vizitat Delta în 2016, în scădere cu 16,8% față de anul precedent. URL: https://www.agerpres.ro/social/2017/02/17/tulcea-numarul-turistilor-care-au-vizitat-delta-in-2016-in-scadere-cu-16-8-fata-de-anul-precedent-17-47-56
[6] Tătar et al. 2017: 131
[7] Cine controlează afacerile din Deltă, după ce epoca lui Vîntu și Bittner a apus. URL: https://www.newmoney.ro/cine-controleaza-afacerile-din-delta-dupa-ce-epoca-lui-vintu-si-bittner-a-apus/
[8] Ioan et al. 2015: 26
[9] Păunică 2014: 98

systems and garbage disposal are also almost nonexistent, causing not only shortcomings for the people, but also greatly contribute to the pollution of the environment.

The lack or hurdle of rapid first aid in form of an ambulance service, hospitals, pharmacies, possibility for fast firefighter interventions, and other services like the post, only add to the low standard of living of the locals.

Over and above all mentioned, paved streets are nonexistent all throughout the Delta (except a few main streets in the town of Sulina), and according to the Governor of the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve Authority conventional asphalt is forbidden by law in the whole perimeter of the protected area. Public transportation is operated only on the main canals at most once a day. Private taxi-boats are available at extra cost, but are arguably more harmful for the nature, especially since the speed limit of 30 km/h is not always respected. Dry land public transportation does not work according to a timetable.

Motor vehicles are a recent sight on the deltas few roads and are not subject to any other particular emission standards than the national regulations. In Romania only the road police may punish traffic-related abuses and the lack thereof is highly taken advantage of by the locals. Consequently one may find improper home-made vehicles, or second-hand SUVs imported from the United Kingdom with right hand drive, often without license plates or the no longer valid ones from the country they imported it from. Horse-drawn carriages or agricultural vehicles are a common alternative for mainland travel,

Characteristically to centralist countries, accessing funding (and the lack thereof) has been an unofficial problem in Romania ever since the change of the regime in 1990. Even before Romania's 2007 admission to the EU, funding was available for development nationwide. On one hand investments – public or private – are hindered by the necessity for protecting the nature and sustainability in the Biosphere Reserve. Respecting the harsh environmental protection laws is troublesome, and if at all possible, then very costly. Money is to be received from the European Community through different programs, but this rarely becomes reality. Some communes are not eligible for funding due to, as for the case of the C.A. Rosetti municipality, not complying with the minimum 2000 inhabitants-quota, the administrative division numbering only 910 inhabitants at the last official census in 2011. Even if it were eligible, the share of funding that has to be supported from the local budget, even if small as percentage in comparison to what the EU provides, is enormous for an administration that struggles to collect taxes from unemployed people and retirees.

By the principle "what is already developed, may be developed further, while what is underdeveloped may survive how it can" villages like Mila 23[10] for instance are experiencing a positive evolution regarding tourism and infrastructure, which reflects itself in the locals' daily life while isolated localities with a much more authentic vibe and lifestyle like the Russian-lipovan village of Sfiștofca continue to decline and lose their uniqueness. The slightly positive development trend altogether is however not a consequence of remarkable efforts of the authorities to animate the delta, but rather a

[10] Păunică 2014: 101

natural result of the stabilization of Romania as a whole in the European context. While the beginning is good and the authorities have a positive outlook on the future, a faster but not less cautious behavior should be adopted in order to save the communities before it is too late and the Danube Delta becomes just an open-air museum in hands of private interests.

Lots of voices agree upon the fact that tourism is the key for a prosperous delta. But until now it has not seemed to work well enough (especially in the remote places) so that the locals can sustain themselves during the whole year, including in the non-touristic season. A good method to expand the audience variety the Danube Delta is marketed to, is to invest in transportation/road, medical and utility infrastructure. Very understandable on the other hand are also the voices of the people that claim that biosphere and infrastructure exclude themselves and the targeted mass tourism will destroy the nature to the point in which nothing will be worth seeing anymore.

However, careful planning while balancing out the human and natural elements and their needs can halt the delta from falling in to extremes and becoming either one impenetrable natural fortress, or one large polluted swamp area of no particular biological interest. The tourist coming to the delta takes an unwritten commitment that he will step out of this comfort zone, thus he is not going to expect conditions like in a highly mass-touristic and developed area like the Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany for instance. There is little chance other forms of tourism than agro- and eco-tourism can be sustainable in the delta, but those too have to be ready to offer a minimum standard of civilization. The niche of visitors is yet too narrow, so that it needs to be expanded in order for more locals to be able to decently live from tourism. Consequently, the need for civil works in the delta is to be looked at as a necessity, a necessary evil in worst case, and not as a caprice or the desire to bring modernity to a nature reserve at any cost.

Recommendations

One of the most simple and non-invasive ways to improve transport in the delta is to improve it before it enters the natural reserve. In order to make people to allow themselves to spend more time inside the Danube Delta and shift away from the fast-tourism is to facilitate the way until the gates of the biosphere reserve. Being situated at the easternmost point of Romania and ranking third in the EU after places in Finland or Cyprus getting to Tulcea can be quite intimidating even to people from the western part of Romania, let alone Western Europe, especially since Romania is not renowned for its efficient public transportation. A first step would be to reopen the "Delta Dunării" airport in Tulcea for commercial flights now with modernization works being completed[11] with regular flights during the summertime at least from Bucharest, if not from another European destination as well. Until then, connections can be made with the already functioning "Mihail Kogălniceanu" International Airport in Constanța. Modernization works, speed increase and modern, regular trains on the railway until Tulcea are also not to be

[11] Prima cursă charter pe Aeroportul "Delta Dunării" Tulcea după modernizare. URL: http://www.dobrogeanews.ro/?p=5590

excluded, especially since this transportation method is popular among foreign tourists. In the field of road transport, except for the Danube Bridge in Brăila that is already in advanced planning stages[12], traffic to the region does not justify building a motorway[13]. It is to be kept in mind, that these actions would not only facilitate tourism in the Danube Delta, but also help the people in the whole region.

This approach to solving the transportation issue in the Delta, will probably temporarily increase the fast tourism, especially in the first phase, but may also give incentives for people to spend extra time in (nowadays) more isolated villages since they could easily return home if they needed to. On long-term, scheduled transportation methods will create reliability in traveling to the delta and could increase tourism altogether.

Targeted with the modernized road connections is a ripple effect between infrastructure, tourism and the local population: tourism and locals directly benefit from the works, while locals benefit a second time from the implications of a growing tourism. The modernization of the already existent roads in the Danube Delta area are a viable alternative to easing off the ecological pressure of the canals while providing a fast and reliable transportation method for multiple uses. Therefore it will be able to expand the horizon of tourists that visit the delta, even in the remoter parts, while keeping the opportunities for the current type people who visit those areas to do so in generally the same conditions they do today.

Existing roads between villages in the Delta could be paved with cold, ecological, water permeable asphalt or natural rock, which will diminish time inefficiency, discomfort and especially reparation costs for the locals. Due to the low traffic, the construction of only one paved lane with gravel on the sides for the occasion of two vehicles passing one another can be chosen, which also lowers the construction costs and environmental impact. In order maintain the traffic amount and the CO_2 emissions under control, only local vehicles and public transportation may be permitted. Tourists could also have an electric car sharing/renting system set up for distances like Periprava-Sulina, where their personal cars will not be permitted. Electricity for the cars is produced eco-friendly in the already functioning wind turbines south of Tulcea. A successfully implemented similar access system can be found in the Swiss Alps, in the town of Zermatt.

Opening of border crossing points with Ukraine operated by car ferries will allow the region to thrive culturally and economically as a whole once again: Plauru-Izmail would ensure the connection between the two major cities in the delta. Chilia Veche-Kiliya could be a border commerce and cultural crossing point, valuable to the locals. Lastly, Periprava-Vylkove would be a touristic crossing point between the Romanian and Ukrainian side of the delta. The simultaneous functioning of all these crossing points will ensure a 130km long mainland road between Tulcea and Sulina, with the crossing of 3

[12] După Adrian Năstase, și Tudose vrea Podul de la Brăila făcut cu chinezi. URL: http://www.digi24.ro/stiri/economie/transporturi/dupa-adrian-nastase-si-tudose-vrea-podul-de-la-braila-facut-cu-chinezi-770118
[13] Recensământul de circulație rutieră anul 2010. URL: http://i.imgur.com/FeLtuzb.jpg

ferries. In addition to the traffic benefits, the crossing points could also be a new exciting attraction for tourists on both sides that want to discover another country.

Infrastructure and linking up the delta will not help by themselves, on the contrary they may draw a small certain group of tourists that seek out rudimentary living standards and untouched nature out of the region. Therefore other measures are to be implemented simultaneously. Among others, in broad lines the following could be adopted in the battle to keep the local population from leaving and make it thrive through tourism:

- Making use of all of the assets of the delta in the promovation, not just the nature alone – "archaeological remains, museums, and historical monuments. These include the city remain [sic!] Argamum (Jurilovca), Byzantine fortress of Lake Razim (Bisericuța Island), the ruins of the fortress Mahmudia (Beștepe), ruins of the fortress Noviodunum (Isaccea), ruins of Enisala fortress and others. The territory also has a multinational patterns being inhabited by various ethnic groups like Russians, Turks, Tartars, Greeks that preserved their culture and religion during centuries"[14] Tours may go as far as the Serpent Island in the Black Sea.
- Persuading accommodation facilities to declare their tourists so that they appear in statistics by lowering taxes. Thus much more credible data will be delivered for the decision making authorities
- Establishing a (booking) website with all contact information from all available accommodations, restaurants and attractions in the Delta, even local homes – locals may now officially host people in their homes. Courses may be held for locals to learn basic conversational English to communicate with foreigners. Former locals that went working in other European states and have learned those languages might also be convinced to come back.
- Installing a network of webcams in some touristically interesting places in the delta and stream them on the internet to convince potential visitors
- Participation is rightfully becoming one of the key planning elements, a tactic that should also gradually be adopted in the centralistic Romanian administrative apparatus. If local people do not enough initiative or vision a forum may be established on the internet, where people all over the world who show interest might share ideas and solutions for the people/tourism/nature in the Danube Delta.
- Relaxing building and business regulations if and where possible; it should only be made after a thorough environmental study, and activities strictly overseen so that they are not taken advantage of
- Plitvice Lakes National Park in Croatia is a good and bad example at the same time (although not a biosphere reserve); wooden piers – built with local population
- The appearance of the villages can be upheld by subsidize the renovation of local traditional/historical houses while at the same time trying to employ local workforce to do so.

[14] Ioan et al. 2015: 25

Conclusions

The Danube Delta is unique in its natural and anthropological composition even as it is today. Unfortunately a lack of hope and perspective make the few young and able to work people leave. Tourism is still one of the big chances for the delta, but to come to the tourists' capital, administrations have to invest first in infrastructure, which not only draws in the tourists, but also satisfies the locals.

A good part of the ideas enumerated in this report are already included in the Zonal Spatial Planning Program from 2008, but are still to find echo among decision-making political actors. It is, in fact, important what one wants to achieve: maintaining the nature in proportion of 100% with absolutely no compromise, or finding a functioning balance between nature, man, his living standards and economy. After all, humans too are part of the *bio*sphere, therefore they need a future in the Danube Delta while being responsible on how exactly they are going to accomplish this goal.

By working together with Romania's representatives in the European Parliament, the EU can be sensitized to grant funds for the uniqueness of the delta and transform it from a project of the Tulcea County to a European objective. For starters one can try lobbying the EU to renounce the 2000 inhabitants' clause for areas of special interest like the Danube Delta.

In the end, like the scientist Jacques Cousteau, who intensively studied and explored the Danube Delta at the beginning of the 1990s said, "The impossible missions are the only ones that succeed."

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