

## RIVER TOURISM AS A FACTOR FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DANUBE TOURIST REGION – BULGARIA<sup>12</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Rivers are the basis of many human activities, including tourism - with the typical activities that can be carried out along them (cruises, sailing, rafting, fishing, etc.). Prerequisites for this are the attractiveness of their shores (diverse landscapes, flora and fauna), as well as the rich cultural and historical heritage of nearby cities.

River tourism is an alternative type of tourism that uses rivers for recreational and leisure activities, including excursions and walks in nature, swimming and sports. It stimulates the development of the respective territories and generates various opportunities for economic and social impact. The growing demand for such locations for recreation, entertainment and memorable experiences allows the renewal of river areas, their enrichment with new attractions and modern features, creating a new image of these destinations.

The aim of this study is to analyze the place and importance of river tourism for one of the nine separate tourist regions of Bulgaria - the Danube region. The study presents the general theoretical framework of water tourism, examines the potential of river tourism in the country, focuses on the relevant infrastructure along the Bulgarian coast and highlights the contribution of river tourism to the future and sustainability of the region.

**Keywords:** rivers, river tourism, Danube river, infrastructure, Danube tourist region – Bulgaria

### INTRODUCTION

Water as a socio-natural materiality [5] is crucial not only for the maintenance of biological life, but also for social and cultural relations through its numerous interactions with humans. It has a special place in tourism, which is historically associated with holiness and religiosity and, later, with the ideas of well-being and health, established today with the development of spas and seaside resorts. Tourists enjoy the numerous sensory, spiritual and aesthetic experiences that water provides - from the dynamic drama of waterfalls to the quiet creeping of glaciers - and appreciate its erosive and creative impact on landscapes. Water as a tourist resource allows for a number of activities that can be carried out on, in or near lakes, rivers, estuaries, reservoirs, canals, seas and oceans. People consume it, swim or dive in it, snowboard, skate and ski in it when it is frozen, go down the rapids, sail the seas, travel the canals.

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The Danube is one of the largest rivers in Europe. Along its length of 2,888 km. the river crosses or is a border for the countries Germany, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine. Through the Rhine-Main-Danube canal it crosses the whole continent and connects most of the European countries. The river is an economic factor, energy resource, trade route, important artery, cultural route, historical witness and a factor determining the identity of peoples. [8] In recent decades, its tourist importance has increased significantly. The tourist product, created due to the growing interest, is based not only on the river and water, but also on the population, cities, culture, art, landmarks, opportunities for sports, entertainment, recreation.

Tourism is a multifaceted phenomenon. There is a great variety not only of the types of tourism that are practiced, but also of the criteria by which these types are distinguished. When the nature of the geographical environment in which the tourist activities are carried out is accepted as a leading criterion, sea, mountain, rural, urban, lake (lakeside), river (riparian) tourism, etc. can be distinguished. While maritime, mountain and now rural tourism are relatively well studied, the role of rivers as a tourist resource and river tourism are still out of focus.

The object of this study is the Danube tourist region of Bulgaria. The subject of the study are the state and prospects for tourism development in the region. The aim is to characterize the tourist functions of the relatively less studied Bulgarian section of the Danube. In order to achieve the set goal, the problems of the territorial definition are considered, a review of the tourist resource potential is made, the modern tourist development is characterized and the perspectives for future development are discussed. According to the Concept for the tourist zoning of Bulgaria, the Danube tourist region includes the Bulgarian section of the Danube River, the adjacent islands, as well as the territories south of the river. The region is the largest of all nine designated tourist areas in the 2015 strategic document of the Ministry of Tourism. [19] It covers a total of 21% of the country's territory and 16% of its population. It includes 67 municipalities, which are part of 11 districts.

## **NATURE, FEATURES AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RIVER TOURISM**

Rivers concentrate a wide variety of human activities, and tourism and recreation are just some of them. River tourism can be defined as a type of tourism that takes place along a river, as the river is the purpose of tourist travel and is directly related to the activities practiced by tourists. Rivers are a significant natural water flow, which flows in a well-formed natural river bed and are fed by surface (mostly rainwater) and groundwater. [9] Despite significant fluctuations in water volume, the flow is continuous. The rivers differ significantly according to their location and are divided into mountain rivers and valley rivers. The mountain rivers flow in narrow and deep valleys with a significant slope and high speed, while the plain rivers flow through wide and terraced river valleys with low speed. Depending on their water volume, rivers are defined as small and large. As there are no generally accepted criteria for the distinctive features of such a division, it is conditional.

The use of rivers is multifaceted. Undoubtedly, they are huge reservoirs of fresh water. Their waters are of special importance in agriculture for irrigation, as well as for water supply of inhabited areas. They are particularly important for transport and trade, as well as for industry. They are an important resource not only for the energy sector, but also for a number of other industries. Globally, the use of rivers for recreation is growing, and fishing in them is being transformed from a means of subsistence into a tourist attraction.

The tourist functions of the rivers are determined not only by their waters, but also by the presence of gorges, canyons, etc. interesting rock formations, as well as waterfalls, cascades, rapids, karst forms, etc. Wetlands, which are formed mainly in the lower reaches of rivers, are a specific landscape inhabited in many cases by rare and endangered species of plants and animals and they are of interest to nature lovers. All these features are a prerequisite for the great variety of tourist activities that can be practiced along rivers and form the dimensions of the concept of river tourism. The use of rivers for tourism is usually associated with cruises. However, only large rivers allow such. A number of rowing sports can also be practiced. Smaller rivers are suitable for canoeing, rafting, canyoning. Rivers are used for swimming to a lesser extent due to the lower temperatures of the running waters in the temperate and northern latitudes, as well as due to the presence of dangerous representatives of the fauna in the warmer natural areas. Fishing has traditionally been related to rivers, but growing environmental problems and pollution (especially in Europe) call for its limitation and control. Wetlands along rivers and especially in deltas are of paramount importance for ecotourism. The coasts are used for recreation (beach), as well as for sightseeing tours with natural and cultural-historical orientation. Some rivers are the subject of pilgrimages because they are considered sacred and are associated with a number of rituals and beliefs. The banks of many rivers have been inhabited since ancient times. Some of the first settlements in the world appeared near them. Today, many archeological finds have been discovered that are of interest not only to connoisseurs.

These tourist functions are not universal. They are differentiated according to the location of the river, as well as depending on whether we consider its sources, upper, middle, lower reaches or estuaries. The springs (especially of the big rivers) have always attracted people's curiosity. They are often associated with traditions, legends and religious beliefs. The upper reaches are clean and fast. They are suitable for fishing and some water sports such as rafting. The middle currents are used for recreation, sailing, as well as for sightseeing tours - visiting various sites of cultural, historical and cognitive value such as ancient mills, bridges, tepavitsas, historical sites associated with various events, old ships often of historical value. In the lower reaches the rivers are larger, their waters are calmer and flow through more densely populated areas. This determines their use for various rowing sports, cruises, recreation. The estuaries (especially when they are deltas) are subject to ecotourism, photo hunting, bird watching, rowing, panoramic walks. [1] [11]

## **RIVER TOURISM IN BULGARIA**

There are over 1,200 rivers in Bulgaria. The total length of the river network is 19,761 km. However, only 30 of them are over 100 km long and only 2 have catchment areas over 10,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Most of the rivers are small and dry up in summer. These features are determined by the small area, diverse terrain and climatic specifics in the country.

However, river tourism in Bulgaria is one of the earliest types of tourism, along with sea and mountain tourism. As early as the 19th century, boating began to acquire a tourist character. The beginning of river tourism in Bulgaria is considered to be 1889, when the first company with such a goal was founded - "Swan". In the following years this type of activity took a serious position in Bulgarian tourism along a number of Bulgarian rivers: Iskar, Ogosta, Yantra, Vit, Osam, Struma, Maritsa, Tundzha, Arda, etc. Tourist trips during the summer season are carried out at the mouths of the rivers Kamchia and Ropotamo. Kayak is practiced on the Yantra, Danube, Rusenski Lom, Arda (Kardzhali dam), etc. The Arda rivers (recreational, water sports, fishing) Tundzha (ecotourism),

Rusenski Lom (nature-cognitive and cultural-cognitive tourism), Iskar (canyoning, fishing), etc. develop their significant tourist and resource potential.

On March 17, 1935 on the state pontoon of the port of Ruse was held the opening ceremony of the first passenger shipping on the Danube under the Bulgarian flag. After the official part in Ruse, the passenger ship Vit sailed for Vidin, and the passenger ship Iskar sailed from Vidin to Ruse. These are also the first ships available to the newly established River Coastal Navigation Service of the Railways and Ports Directorate. In 1940, the National Assembly passed the Law on Bulgarian River Navigation, and the directorate was transformed into an independent structure - shipping company "Bulgarian River Navigation" based in Ruse. In just a few years, the shipping company's activity grew, and the fleet was replenished with more and more vessels. Until the Second World War, the company has some of the most modern Danube 4 express cargo and refrigerator ships, 3 large luxury passenger ships ("Tsar Boris III", "Queen Joanna" and "Tsar Simeon"), a ferry for rail transport wagons and passengers between Bulgaria and Romania, tractors and barges. After the Second World War, the shipping company "Bulgarian River Navigation" began the accelerated construction of a series of vessels in the shipyards in Ruse, Burgas and Varna and in various European countries. In the early 90's its fleet numbered almost 300 vessels - pushers, passenger and express ships, open and closed barges, oil, specialized, ro-ro sections, etc. [265]

Today, the Bulgarian Shipping Company is one of the most authoritative and well-established carriers on the Danube transport market, servicing the cargo turnover of the Danube countries and the transit between Western and Eastern Europe, from Sulina and Constanta on the Black Sea to Mainz on the Rhine.

The only Bulgarian company specializing in river cruise tourism is Danube Tours. [30] It enjoys good reputation both on the domestic and international market, offering its customers professionalism, responsibility and emotion from unique travels. The company is the successor of the Balkantourist established in 1948. It made its first steps in cruising on the Danube in 1983 with the purchase of two passenger ships - "Sofia" and "Ruse", which were built in a Dutch shipyard. They have 4-star category and are suitable for cruises on the Danube from the German city of Passau to the Danube Delta. Seeing the prospects in the development of river cruise tourism, shareholders are investing in expanding shipping capacity and in recent years renovated and renewed their vessels annually. In 2004 the ship "Ruse Prestige" was built (capacity 160 passengers, 40 crew), whose area of navigation is from Amsterdam on the Rhine to the Danube Delta. In 2006, two new ships were purchased, which are smaller in size and allow for greater flexibility and coverage of other areas of navigation on European waterways – "Heinrich Heine" (capacity 110 passengers, 30 crew) and Elegant Lady (capacity 128 passengers, 32 crew). In 2012, the fleet of Danube Tours increased with the ship "Ariana" (160 passengers and 40 crew). The company is becoming an integral part of the European tourist market, successfully continuing the traditions of Bulgarian passenger shipping.

In the spring of 2019, the company's newest flagship was launched - the motor ship "Adora" (191 passengers and 48 crew). The modern court meets the latest trends in river navigation, both in terms of technical and operational characteristics and in terms of comfort of guests on board. It is 135 m long and 11.40 m wide. It has 95 cabins on three decks (some of them have French balconies). In addition to the usual for this type of ships - a main restaurant and a panoramic bar, a stern restaurant has been built, which offers alternative menus of choice, and tourists can watch how their food is prepared.

Currently, Danube Tours AD owns 4 river cruise ships with a total capacity of 640 beds, which cover 80% of the famous cruise destinations in Europe. They transport tourists from Western Europe, USA, Canada, Russia, Bulgaria, etc. The crews are Bulgarian, fluent in German and English. Highly qualified master chefs offer specialties from the Bulgarian and international cuisine. There are all-day animation programs, including presentations of Bulgarian folklore, competitions, fun games, tasting of Bulgarian wines, etc.

Bulgaria is also a participant in the International Tourist Regatta TID (German Tour International Danubien) on the Danube, held annually since 1956. This is the longest rowing trip in the world of this kind and is a 2.5-month boat trip. It is organized by the tourist associations of the participating countries. Since 1968, the regatta always starts at the end of June from Ingolstadt (Germany). It passes through the other co-organizing countries - Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania. It ends in the first week of September after 2516 km in Sfantu Gheorghe (Romania) on the Black Sea. Some participants sail the whole distance every year, others only some stages of it, according to their desire and abilities. The beginning for Bulgaria was set in 1964. In 1966 a full Bulgarian stage was suggested, which ended in Ruse. Three years later it was extended to Silistra, where is the last official stop in the Bulgarian part of the river to this day. In all Bulgarian ports where they dock, the participants are officially welcomed and places are provided for their stay and feeding, cultural program and tourist tours in the region. In 2020 the regatta was postponed due to the Covid pandemic, and in 2021 about 50 Bulgarian rowers leaved Novo Selo, including the clubs in Pleven, Vidin and Sofia.

## **DANUBE TOURIST REGION OF BULGARIA**

The Bulgarian section of the Danube is part of the lower reaches of the river. It stretches from the mouth of Timok River (the northernmost point of Bulgaria and the border with Serbia) to the town of Silistra along 470 km. It includes 48 of the islands of the river. The Danube River has both separation and integration functions. On the one hand, it is a border river for Bulgaria - 4/5 of the northern state border crosses it. On the other hand, the Danube River is crossed by one of the main European transport corridors (№7), which connects Bulgaria with Central and Western Europe. Due to the availability of significant water resources and cheap waterways, important industrial facilities and irrigation systems for agriculture are concentrated there, as well as two duty-free zones (near Vidin and Ruse). After the political changes in the early 90s of the twentieth century, the interstate trade flows changed, but nevertheless for a long time there was only one bridge across the river, built in 1954 (near Ruse, transport corridor № 9). This hampers transport and communications with neighboring Romania and Central Europe. In 2013, the Danube Bridge 2 - "New Europe" was opened (Vidin - Calafat, transport corridor № 4). Today, at the governmental and regional level, there are discussions of a third bridge between Romania and Bulgaria. For comparison, along the upper Danube from the springs to Bratislava there are 60 barrier facilities, 17 of which are hydraulic complexes. [10]

The Bulgarian Danube coast comprises those territories of the country, whose socio-economic development is directly or indirectly, in one degree or another, related to the use of the river. In the Transnational Strategy for Sustainable Territorial Development of the Danube Region with a focus on tourism (DATOURWAY) the Bulgarian Danube coast is considered to be composed of all administrative districts that have direct contact with the Danube River (Vidin, Montana, Vratsa, Pleven, Veliko Tarnovo, Ruse). Silistra),

as well as Razgrad district, which is only 20 km from the Danube bank and has well-defined regional ties with Ruse and Silistra districts. Defined in this way, the designated area covers most of Northern Bulgaria, 25.1% of the territory of Bulgaria, 20.4% of the country's population and provides 16.9% of GDP. The ratio between the numbers shows that this is a less populated area with lagging socio-economic development compared to other parts of Bulgaria. [10]

**Table 1.** Territorial scope and specialization of the Danube tourist region [12]

<b>DANUBE TOURIST AREA</b>	
<b>Main specialization</b>	Cultural and cruise tourism
<b>Advanced specialization</b>	1. Cultural and historical tourism 2. River cruise tourism 3. Adventure and ecotourism 4. Urban leisure and shopping tourism 5. Wine and culinary tourism 6. Religious and pilgrimage tourism
<b>Management Center</b>	Ruse
<b>Districts</b>	<b>Municipalities</b>
1. Vidin (partially)	Belogradchik, Vidin, Boynitsa, Gramada, Dimovo, Kula, Makresh, Novo Selo, Ruzhintsi
2. Vratsa (partially)	Borovan, Bregovo, Byala Slatina, Kozloduy, Moesia, Oryahovo, Hayredin
3. Montana (partially)	Boychinovtsi, Brusartsi, Vulchedrum, Lom, Medkovets, Yakimovo
4. Lovech (partially)	Letnitsa
5. Pleven (the whole)	Belene, Gulyantsi, Dolna Mitropolia, Dolni Dabnik, Iskar, Kneja, Levski, Nikopol, Pleven, Pordim, Cherven bryag
6. Veliko Tarnovo (partially)	Pavlikeni, Polski Trambesh, Svishtov, Suhindol
7. RUSE (whole)	Borovo, Byala, Vetovo, Dve Mogili, Ivanovo, Ruse, Slivo Pole, Tsenovo
8. Silistra (whole)	Alfatar, Glavinitsa, Dulovo, Kaynardzha, Sitovo, Silistra, Tutrakan
9. Razgrad (whole)	Zavet, Isparih, Kubrat, Loznitsa, Razgrad, Samuil, Tsar Kaloyan
10. Shumen (partially)	Venets, Kaolinovo, Nikola Kozlevo, Hitrino
11. Targovishte (partially)	Opaka, Popovo, Targovishte

The delineation of tourist areas is based on the territorial unity of natural and socio-economic sites and activities with a strong tourist orientation. The territorial scope of the Danube tourist region, defined in the Concept for tourist zoning of Bulgaria [18], coincides partly with the borders of the already defined Bulgarian Danube coast. As the sociologist and social entrepreneurship expert G. Gavrailov notes, “The Danube tourist region is the largest in the country, but unfortunately with the fewest visiting tourists. Only 2% of Bulgarian tourism is concentrated along the Danube. The potential is huge. The people are very hospitable, the nature is well preserved. There are also many problems related to demographic backwardness and lack of good infrastructure, but they can be solved gradually.(...) We all know that modern culture and European civilization have arrived in Bulgaria along the Danube. Unfortunately, in recent years we have turned our backs on this element of our development, but still in the Danube cities this sense of European culture is alive.” [26]

Apart from being the largest, it is also the northernmost tourist area. It spreads on the territory of the Danube plain. To the north it reaches the Danube River, to the east - Varna Black Sea coast, to the south - the region of Stara Planina, to the west - the state border with Serbia. It is divided into two subregions - West Danube and East Danube. The center for management of the tourist region is Ruse.

The main specialization of the Danube tourist region and its unique competitive advantages as a tourist destination are in the field of cultural and cruise tourism. The extended specialization also includes cultural-historical, river, adventure and eco, urban entertainment and shopping, wine and culinary, religious and pilgrimage tourism. (Table 1.)

### **INFRASTRUCTURE FOR RIVER TOURISM ON THE BULGARIAN SIDE OF THE DANUBE RIVER**

Along the nearly 500 km of the Bulgarian river border, 13 ports for public transport of national importance and 17 ports for transport of regional importance have been built. 10,445 m is the total length of the quay front. Possibilities for processing 10 million tons of cargo per year along the Danube are provided. The Bulgarian Danube ports (Vidin, Archar, Lom, Kozloduy, Oryahovo, Nikopol, Svishtov, Ruse, Silistra), as well as the ferries (Vidin - Calafat, Oryahovo - Beket, Ruse - Giurgiu, Silistra - Kalarash) are important mainly for freight and are used sparingly or not as passenger ports. The largest river port, Ruse, which includes several smaller ports, provides over 62% of the river's cargo turnover. 30% are for the port of Lom and 8% for the port of Vidin. In general, the current situation of port infrastructure does not meet the requirements of Directive 2000/59 / EU[13], since, with few exceptions, all facilities were built in the years of the last century. [3] Almost all European countries along the Danube have facilities to control water levels, which makes the river navigable throughout the year. However, no such infrastructure has been built on the territory of Bulgaria. For this reason, navigation is impossible in low waters. Another existing difficulty for unimpeded navigation are the deposits of sand, gravel and silt. The work on the modernization and optimization of the activities for rehabilitation of the waterway in the common Bulgarian-Romanian section of the Danube is in progress. Funding is from European programs. Delivery of equipment for the removal of critical sections and construction of the relevant hydraulic facilities is expected. The total budget of the project is over BGN 20.5 million. [20]

A significant problem for the development of the region (including tourism) is the outdated and poorly developed road network of land transport. Second-class and third-class roads make up 83.68% of the entire national road network in the region, and the highways are under construction. Republican roads without asphalt covering still exist (0.84%). Unsatisfactory operational condition do not meet market requirements and priorities set out in the country's transport policy. [2] The railway network is also not available for all (even major) towns and villages and is obsolete and depreciated.

The status of the road network hinders accessibility and reduces the attractiveness of tourist resources, especially the more peripheral ones. The roads managed by the local and municipal authorities are in the main part with deteriorated operability. These roads are of low class and poor quality and this is a serious obstacle to economic development and tourism in the region. As a disadvantage should be pointed out the fact that the transport accessibility of the municipalities is better provided in the north-south direction, which ensures the connections of the Danube cities with the interior of the country. The actual lack of regular passenger river connection, combined with the lack of

a first-class road connecting municipalities in the west-east direction, is a serious obstacle to the economic integration of the region and its development as a tourist destination. Therefore, it is extremely important to build a first-class northern Danube road Vidin - Lom - Svishtov - Ruse - Silistra, which will improve transport accessibility to coastal areas and thus strengthen investor and tourist interest in them. Together with the Danube as a waterway, the direction will be important for the integration of the districts and municipalities located along the coastal territory and the strengthening of the territorial cooperation with the neighboring border areas. [24]

Some of these problems are set in the Bulgarian national position for the preparation and implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. [24] Within this strategy, Bulgaria offers the implementation of complex projects in a number of main areas, among which the infrastructure ones are the leading: modernization of port infrastructure, promotion of intermodal transport, provision of cross-river connections, leading transport infrastructure and development of information systems, etc.

The existing tourist infrastructure on the territory of the Danube region is concentrated mainly in several areas with established tourist destinations. This peculiarity in the localization of the means of accommodation, in the places for food and entertainment is determined by the territorial location of the available tourist resources and by the degree of representation of the resort-tourist functions in certain towns and villages. In practice, the tourist infrastructure is of a scale relatively corresponding to the available tourist resources. With a high concentration of accommodation and a high number of beds are the municipalities and their centers, which are the object of tourist interest. Such are Ruse, Pleven, Vidin, Razgrad, Silistra, Targovishte, etc. In the municipality of Ruse, for example, is concentrated 95.8% of the entire bed capacity of the district of Ruse used for the needs of tourism, in the city of Pleven - 93.5% of all beds in the district, etc. [22] The small municipalities in the zone of influence of the city of Ruse (Ivanovo and Dve Mogili), which have tourist resources, have poorly developed tourist infrastructure. The needs of tourists are met in the regional center. The discrepancy between the available tourist resources and the built tourist infrastructure in the municipalities around Pleven, Vidin, etc. is similar. In some of the small municipalities they have only 1-2 accommodation places with a total capacity of less than 50 beds. [22]

The complementary tourist infrastructure in the region, although slow and cumbersome, is growing and it is renewed with:

- eco-trails and roadside landscape parks, signposts and boards with routes, shelters, etc., used for the purposes of eco-tourism;
- hunting lodges, shelters, etc., serving the needs of hunting tourism;
- shelters and towers for photo tourists;
- small wine and tasting halls - for the purposes of wine tourism, etc

Foreign tourists who have landed on the Bulgarian coast most often complain about the lack of amenities in ports and approaches to urban areas - lack of toilets, currency exchange offices, POS terminals or ATMs, etc. [25]

The territory of the Danube tourist region as a whole has preserved environment, without serious industrial pollutants, severe environmental problems and contaminated areas. The main environmental parameters are within the permissible values. The existing problems are typical for the country as a whole and are due to the insufficient specialized infrastructure. The main environmental problems of the region are primarily related to air quality. A characteristic problem is the pollution of the waters of the Danube, which is largely due not to internal factors, but to pollution in the upper and middle reaches of the

river. In general, the gasification of settlements and improvements in waste collection, solving wastewater problems, cleaning and reclamation of areas contaminated by illegal landfills are expected to have a positive impact on the environmental situation with corresponding benefits for tourism. [14]

Not only roads and access have long been important for tourist destinations, but also the general technical and social infrastructure - availability of sewerage and clean drinking water, electricity, Internet, health care, shops, producers of local food and organic products, souvenir producers, qualification of the service personnel, etc. In this regard are the requirements for increased security of services, which relate to the security of tourists themselves (health, safety, terrorist acts, flights, theft) and the security of information exchanged on the Internet via computers and mobile devices and electronic payments - credit and debit cards, online banking, payment through a POS terminal or mobile phone, etc

### **RIVER TOURISM - THE TRADEMARK OF TOURISM IN THE DANUBE REGION**

Each of the tourist regions of Bulgaria has the task to impose its "tourist physiognomy", which will be easily recognizable and attractive, to be distinguished by unique tourist destinations and offers. From this point of view, the specialization of the individual regions in terms of the offered tourist product is very important, in accordance with the tourist resources, the infrastructure and the gained experience. According to the guidelines of the Concept, cruise tourism is indicated as the main specialized type of tourism in the Danube region. (As already mentioned, this type of tourism in Bulgaria can be developed only in the region under consideration.) River tourism is related to the expanded specialization of the designated area. However, insofar as in this case the two types of tourism overlap and complement each other, it is appropriate to consider the concept of "river tourism" to be the broader of the two and to be a leader in defining the characteristics of the area. In the understanding of the authors of this concept should be subordinated to all other types of tourism existing and developing in the Danube tourist region - cultural, historical, adventure and eco, urban entertainment and shopping, wine and culinary, religious and pilgrimage tourism.

Cultural and historical tourism, for example, has significant resources in the region, but it could develop successfully in all other tourist areas and therefore cannot be perceived as profiling. The same applies to the other types of tourism mentioned. Bird watching can thrive in the country's numerous wetlands and nature parks. Wine tourism can also rely on the ever-increasing vineyards in Bulgaria and specific local wines. However, when it comes to the Danube tourist region, it is important to focus efforts on developing, creating and promoting a regional tourist product with an emphasis on river tourism, ie. to derive a distinctive set of tourist activities, connected one way or another to the Danube River.

The amazing nature, in combination with the cultural and historical heritage, is a natural brand of tourism in the Danube region, and the contribution of river tourism is crucial for the promotion and development of this brand. "A comparison is often made between the sights in the upper and lower reaches of the Danube. In the upper Danube are the countries whose capitals are located above the river and the cities face the Danube. In contrast, here in the lower Danube there are almost no settlements, wildlife prevails with typical sandy islands and river beaches and a wild world that can not be seen if one stands on the river bank. This world can only be experienced if you travel on the river." [7]

The presence of a large number of natural landmarks (rock formations, caves, waterfalls, islands, wetlands, rare plants, animals, etc.), some of which are of high quality, arouses undoubted tourist interest. Moreover, the diverse and attractive natural conditions and resources are combined with diverse anthropogenic tourist sites. This expands the chances of developing original products and proposals for tourism along or near the river. The presentation of these resources in an appropriate way is a prerequisite for the development of alternative types of tourism, generated by the interest in the river and its adjacent territories - ecological, cognitive, hunting, fishing, sports tourism, etc. However, all these specialized types of tourism should be considered as part of the main, river tourism product of the Danube region. At the same time, the fact that most sites with potential for tourism have both purely infrastructural barriers (access, cleanliness of the environment, etc.) and many unfulfilled actions for their exposure and socialization (restoration, visual information, attractive presentation, marketing, etc.) cannot be ignored.

Of the tourist resources, organically related to river tourism and the resulting opportunities, with great attractiveness and established as tourist destinations at different parts of the Danube bank are:

- the natural phenomenon Belogradchik rocks (Vidin district). Ancient Romans built a fortification there, which was later used by both Bulgarians and Ottomans - Belogradchik fortress. 100 meters from it is the Astronomical Observatory of the Institute of Astronomy at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences;
- Magurata Cave (near the village of Rabisha, Belogradchik municipality) - they call it "the eighth wonder of the world". With its 700 extremely well-preserved rock paintings, it is the largest prehistoric gallery on the Balkan Peninsula. It is protected by UNESCO as a natural landmark. It resembles an underground cathedral and is one of the brightest tourist attractions in Eastern Europe. In terms of soil and climate, the area around Rabishka mound is close to that of the French region of Champagne, so here is produced the best natural sparkling wine in Bulgaria by classical technology;
- Rabishko Lake - the largest tectonic lake in the country with an area of 1.5 km<sup>2</sup>, with a well-formed beach. It offers perfect conditions for surfing and swimming, hunting and fishing. 100 meters from its southern shore there is a campsite.
- the unique nature park "Persina", located along the entire length of Svishtov - Belen lowland and covering all Bulgarian Danube islands in this part of the river. Among them is the island of Belene (or Persin) - the ninth largest along the Danube. The maintained reserve "Persian marshes" is situated there;
- Significant water resources of Pleven district - in addition to the Danube River, on its territory are the rivers Iskar (flows into the Danube in the district), Vit and many dams and water basins (mainly in the municipalities of Dolni Dabnik, Pordim and Levski) with rich tourist potential;
- Rusenski Lom Nature Park (protected area), covering the valley of the Rusenski Lom River (a right tributary of the Danube River) and its tributaries. There are 22 species of fish, 10 species of amphibians and 19 species of reptiles in the rivers. The greatest diversity is of birds - 193 nesting species, 127 of which are included in the Red Book of Bulgaria or are endangered in Europe. The Danube shore in the municipality of Ivanovo is one of the most picturesque sections of the Bulgarian river bank. It is covered with thick forests with diverse vegetation. Two parts are clearly separated: western - low, partially swampy and eastern - steep, in some places even vertical. There are many possible places for active recreation (boating, rowing, water sports, fishing and fishing competitions), as well as evidence of ancient ports and fortresses.

Here is the third longest cave in Bulgaria and one of the most beautiful - Orlova Chuka;

- the ruin of the Ivanovo rock churches and the medieval town of Cherven - "mountain under the plain", "oasis of wildlife" with surprising biodiversity. For the most part it coincides with the Rusenski Lom Nature Park. More than 110 representatives of the feathered world circle over its canyons, many of which are endangered worldwide. This is one of the 5 places in Bulgaria with the most birds nesting in the rocks. The rock niches of Polomieto in the 13th century were used for the holy monastery by monks who settled in the area. Nowadays this invaluable historical heritage is under the auspices of UNESCO;
- the rock monastery near the village of Basarbovo (12 km. from Ruse on the way to Ivanovo) successfully complements the history of the monasteries in the valley of the river Rusenski Lom and is an attraction as the only active rock monastery in our country;
- the maintained Srebarna Biosphere Reserve, included in the UNESCO World Natural and Cultural Heritage List. It is located on the territory of Silistra district and is one of the three Bulgarian wetlands of global importance. It is best known for its ornithological wealth with the only colony of the globally endangered Dalmatian pelican in Bulgaria;
- the coast in the region of Ruse and Silistra, developing in organic unity and harmony with the river. Most of the municipalities in the two districts that have access to the Danube have preserved the traditions in fishing, fish farming, fish cuisine and production of fish products. The exoticism of the environment and everyday life in the so-called "Fishing villages", combined with the opportunities for development of water sports, represent a significant resource for enriching the offered tourist product;
- Sboryanovo Historical and Archaeological Reserve (Razgrad District) with over 140 sites (settlements, sanctuaries and necropolises) from ancient times. The most significant discovery in this area is the Sveshtari Thracian Royal Tomb (III century BC), included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Near Sboryanovo are the two hunting farms of Ludogorie - "Karakuz" and "Voden" (municipalities Dulovo and Alfatar), which offer elite hunting tourism.

## **RIVER CRUISE TOURISM**

The importance of large rivers for tourism is most evident in the development of cruise tourism. It is also the leading, priority type of tourism, which can be developed only in this tourist region of Bulgaria. Today a cruise means a trip by water transport (including coastal excursions), sightseeing of port cities and their surroundings, combined with a variety of entertainment on board of sea and river liners. The main goal of tourists is relaxation and pleasure. The river cruise offers water tourist routes (usually multi-day) with a river boat, on which the tourist is provided with a package of transport, accommodation and meals, entertainment on board, land excursions and other tourist services. The ship moves along the river or lake-river system from one point to another according to the cruise program with a planned stop in cities or visits of interesting tourist sites. River trips and cruises are short-term (1 - 3 days) and long-term (25 - 30 days). River cruises are an expensive type of tourism and this in modern economic conditions regulates passenger traffic on tourist lines. At the same time, these cruises have a number of advantages over other types of specialized tourism and tempting unique properties such as:

- constant proximity to the shore - there is practically no risk of shipwreck;
- there are no hikes during which tourists are surrounded only by water. During the trip, various landscapes change before the eyes, passing towns and villages;
- less accessible routes;
- the probability of seasickness is lower; the river cruise is like traveling by bus, but with the amenities of the ship - places for walks, animation, comfortable cabins, full board;
- organized and dynamic acquaintance with attractive natural and cultural sites in one or several countries;
- onshore excursions and / or participation in special events at places close to the respective ports;
- realization of different types and purposes of the trip (cognitive, business, educational, shopping, pilgrimage, etc.);
- conditions are provided for rest;
- high level of comfort and service;
- various animation and entertainment programs on board of the ship;
- recreational activities in the resort areas, beach;
- competitive prices, allowing the formation of stable demand.

The season of river cruises in our country starts every year in early March.

However, the surface waters of Bulgaria have little impact on the development of transport and river tourism in particular. There are no large navigable rivers in the interior of the country and therefore river transport and river tourism are relevant only to the Danube River. Convenient connections have been established with other Danube countries (Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Ukraine). Cruise tourism in the Bulgarian section of the river is developing more and more intensively. Most of the Danube cruises last from 9 to 25 days. Ships are smaller than traditional overseas ships. The peak season in Europe is from June to September, but cruises in the transitional seasons (April to May or September to the end of October) are also popular because they save money. The price of river cruises on the Danube includes all the places listed in the offer for accommodation on land and while sailing on the river, most of the meals, entertainment, sightseeing, tour guide services, etc. [6]

Danube river cruises are classified according to the quality of the cabins and accommodation as: [28]

- budget - from \$ 45 to \$ 130 per person per day, plus plane tickets to the initial ports;
- first class - from \$ 80 to \$ 275 per person per day, plus plane tickets;
- luxury - from \$ 100 to \$ 400 per person per day, plus plane tickets.

Ruse is the largest Danube port in Bulgaria and as such welcomes the largest number of cruise ships almost all year round - the season has already extended to such an extent that the first river tourists leave in early spring (March), and the last arrive shortly before the beginning of winter (in November). For the period from January 1 to August 10, 2019, 300 passenger ships with 41,651 tourists stopped at the port of Ruse. [29] (For comparison - in the first half of 2018 the figures are 25,262 tourists from 179 ships, and in 2017 - 18,900 tourists from 143 ships [31]) For the whole of 2020 (before the vaccines against COVID-19 appeared), only 24 cruise ships docked at the port of Ruse. From the beginning of 2021 to the end of August, there were 28 ships with 2,988 tourists, the first of which docked only on June 25. These data show that cruising tourism to the lower Danube has been severely affected by the global health crisis but is slowly recovering. The trips start late and stop early - in mid-September. In the first year of the pandemic,

Serbia and Hungary banned cruise ships from entering their ports. Before the COVID crisis, cruise tourists to the delta came mainly from the United States, Germany, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and France.

The other ports on the river that most often welcome ships are Vidin, Nikopol, Oryahovo. In 2016, 181 cruise ships with an average of 150 passengers docked at the port of Vidin. In 2017, the number of ships was 192, and in 2018 - 256. During the tourist season of 2019, the port of Vidin accepted nearly 340 cruise ships with nearly 40,000 foreign tourists. [25] In 2020, voyages and visits of 480 ships are planned, but none are realized. [23]

Ships carrying tourists on the Danube sail mainly under the Swiss, German and Canadian flags. Tourists are from all continents. The Americans travel the most, followed by the Japanese and Western Europeans, who most often travel on 14-day programs from the German section of the river to its delta. There are Canadians, New Zealanders, Australians, Chinese, Filipinos. 90 percent are elderly, with married couples predominating. Most of the passenger ships offer "all inclusive" packages, which include sightseeing of the four capitals along the river - Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade, as well as walking tours and sightseeing in Bulgaria and Romania. The trips are made in two directions - from east to west and from west to east. On Bulgarian territory they usually stop in Ruse and / or Vidin, but Svishtov, Nikopol, Silistra are also included in some programs. There are excursions to Vidin - Belogradchik, Ruse - Veliko Tarnovo - Arbanassi - Svishtov, Svishtov - Veliko Tarnovo - Ivanovo Rock Churches - Ruse and Ruse - Ivanovo Rock Churches - Rusenski Lom Nature Park - Basarbovo Monastery. Performances and presentations on board are offered in Vidin and Ruse. There are also attractive sites with potential, but they are not used for the needs of cruise tourism. These are: the Srebarna Reserve, the ethnographic complex - the Fishermen's Quarter in Tutrakan, the Majidi Tabia Fortress, the Persina Nature Park, etc.

## **PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS**

Despite the generous resources, tourism development does not correspond to the potential opportunities. The problems underlying this dissonance are widely known:

- lagging behind in the development of national and regional infrastructures and in the use of the possibilities of modern technologies, information and reservation systems;
- pronounced disproportion in the construction and concentration of the tourist infrastructure and resources;
- Insufficient staff - the region has the least number of working people in the field of tourism; [7]
- scarce information, marketing and advertising;
- Lack of a comprehensive strategy for the tourist area;
- Lack of a regional tourist product with an emphasis on river tourism; lack of coordinated tourist activities, connected in one way or another to the Danube River.

In recent years, the river region has come under the scrutiny of a number of strategic documents and forms of financing economic activities within the European Union. There are new opportunities to address the challenges and exploit its potential in a sustainable way, as set out in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. However, this requires efforts on both local and national levels, from both the private and public sectors. Positive results can be expected only in the long run.

The analyses of the tourist development in the region are carried out periodically and serve the goals of various strategies and projects.[21] [17] [14] [15] [16] The positive

assessments most often note the tourist potential of the territory, the attractive nature, cross-border cooperation, the established partnerships between larger cities and neighboring countries, the availability of financial development schemes, etc. The weaknesses reported are the insufficient tourist flow; insufficiently utilized and socialized tourist potential; insufficient information about the region as a destination, sporadic and insufficiently well-targeted advertising; low level of the tourist infrastructure; technological and innovation lag, lack of administrative capacity; lack of interaction between institutions in the private sector, etc. Opportunities are usually sought in international cooperation in the framework of the Danube Strategy; expanding investments in the region, improving the existing and building modern transport infrastructure (high-class roads, sustainable and flexible transport, cheap and environmentally friendly public transport, bike lanes, etc.), strategically oriented communication and advertising; partnership between the public and private sector and local authorities, etc. Threats / dangers stem from economic stagnation; from the deterioration of the business environment (changes in legislation, tax policy, etc.); irrational use of the existing potential of natural and anthropogenic resources and deterioration of the environmental parameters; lack of consensus among stakeholders; lack of own funds; poor adaptability of the workforce; the negative impact of climate change, energy dependence, demographic collapse, etc. (Fig. 1)

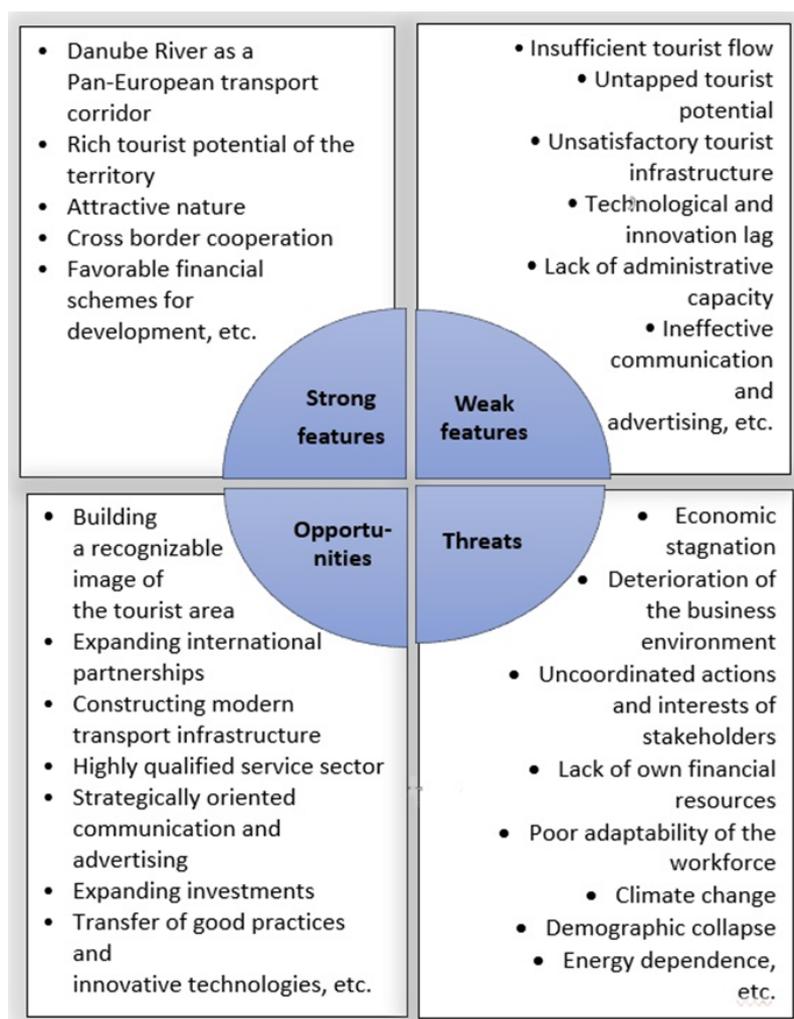


Figure. 1. SWOT matrix of the Danube tourist region

According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), one of the largest and most effective international conservation organizations, the Danube region could become the "Green Heart of Europe". [32] The Fund reports that more than 70 protected areas are located near the Bulgarian waters, and the protected areas included in the European Natura 2000 network are more than 1,000. At the European Union level, Natura 2000 sites attract between 1.2 and 2.2 billion visitors each year, which generates revenues between 5 and 7 billion euros. Unfortunately, statistics show that nearly 80% of riparian natural habitats and fish resources were destroyed in the twentieth century, and the rest are endangered. [33] The loss of biodiversity here, as in other parts of Europe, continues mainly due to the methods used in intensive agriculture, artificial plantations with atypical tree species, poaching, industrial pollution, inconsistent transport infrastructure, correction of natural riverbeds and dams along the rivers.

Nature conservation can, of course, be linked to the sustainable development of the areas concerned. In this sense, the tourist trademark of the Danube region should also include ecologically clean food products produced by small farmers in traditional ways in places of high conservation value. WWF's Danube-Carpathian program has been working for years to establish the region's image as the "Green Heart of Europe" and suggests that this trademark should be used in the framework of the Danube Strategy.

## CONCLUSION

The development of tourism is a complex process that depends on the general state of the environment and the influence of various factors (external and internal) - infrastructure, accessibility, protection and display of natural and cultural heritage, economic opportunities of tourists, etc. The wealth, diversity and value of tourist resources in the Danube region are indisputable. Despite the specifics of each district and municipality in the region, the unifying characteristics of these resources are:

- the Danube River, which has been used by humans for thousands of years and has dominated the region's history;
- the Danube as the largest European transport corridor, on the one hand, and its distinctive features (islands, wetlands, unique biodiversity), on the other hand;
- the specific relief and landscape forms of the coast and its adjacent territories;
- the many natural landmarks and reserves with abundant diversity of flora and fauna;
- the exceptional wealth of cultural and historical monuments and artifacts;
- the preserved way of life, folklore and nature of a large part of the rural areas.

These common features offer a number of advantages and marketing prospects for the development of tourism in the region and predetermine the role of river tourism (including cruise tourism) as a strategic one. Virtually every municipality in the Danube tourist region has the resources to develop some kind of recreation and tourism related to the river. However, this does not mean that there are conditions for offering complete tourist products that attract visitors to all municipalities in the region.

The main conclusions that are reached with regard to river cruise tourism in Bulgaria are: [4]

- the available resources in the Danube region have significant potential for the development of this type of tourism and are a prerequisite for creating new tourism products and enriching existing ones;
- the flow of cruise tourists to the area and their costs on the coast are economically important for business and local communities and it is unjustified to miss the opportunities of growing demand;

- it is necessary to improve the tourist offers in order to diversify the programs on land and to disseminate widely the economic benefits of cruise tourism, as well as to work purposefully to improve the quality of services;
- regional cooperation is crucial for achieving the set goals;
- it is imperative to create a database that will allow monitoring of cruise tourism on the Danube;
- Institutional management of the destination, coordination and synchronization of the efforts of all stakeholders is the ultimate prerequisite for its development.

In the conditions of a dynamic market and great competition, each country in the Danube region expands its resources and opportunities. Among the reasons for the growing importance of tourism on the Danube is the general diversification of the tourist offer, which includes, among other forms of tourism, river cruise tourism as one of the most important forms of tourist activities in the region. The integrated approach to joint initiatives and partnerships to promote tourism along the river undoubtedly supports the sustainable development of the sector.

The task faced by all involved in the management and development of the Danube tourist region is to form the Bulgarian face of tourism and to turn this region into an attractive place, competitive with the Black Sea and ski resorts of the country.

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