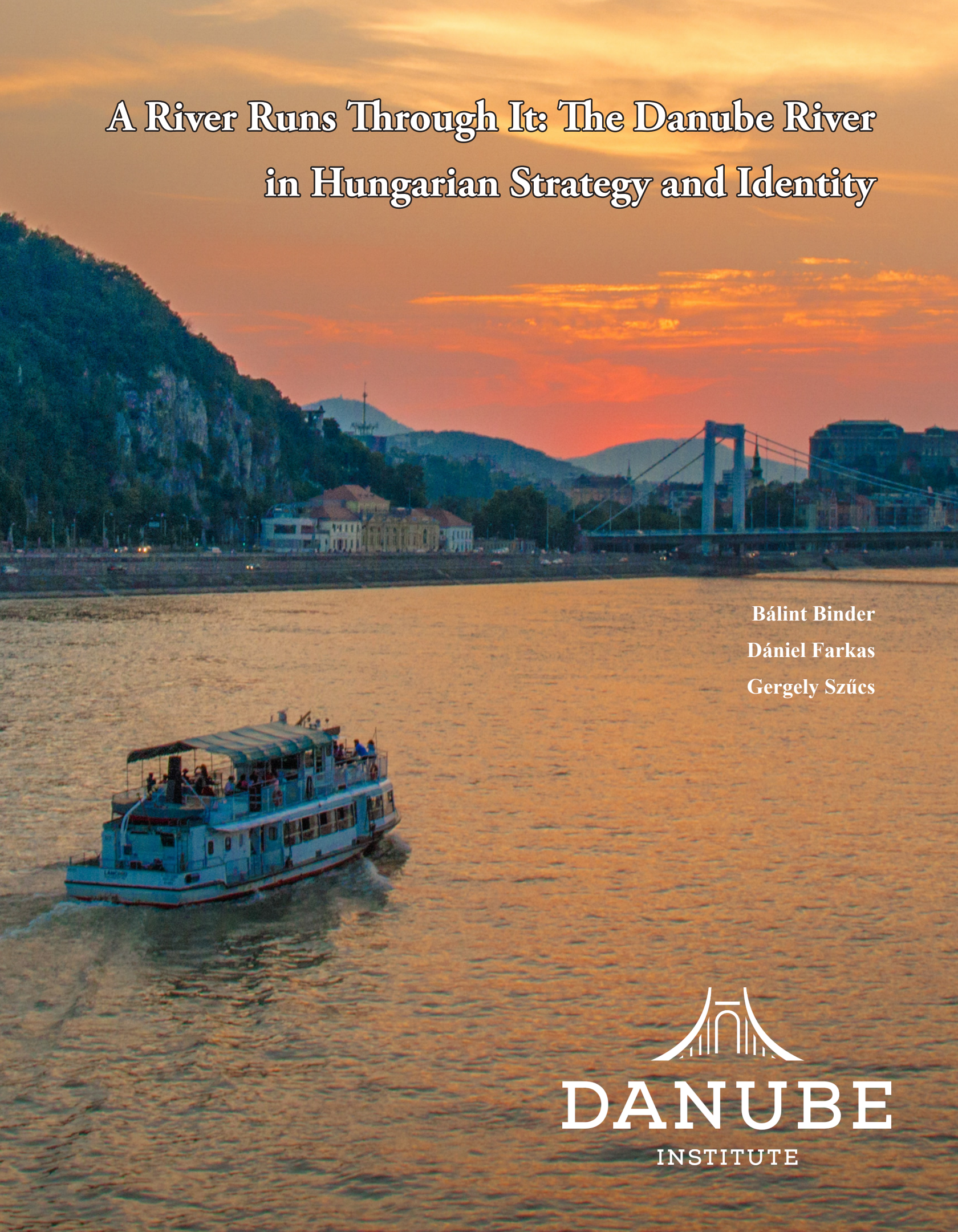
A River Runs Through It: The Danube River in Hungarian Strategy and Identity



Bálint Binder

Dániel Farkas

Gergely Szűcs

DANUBE INSTITUTE

Authors: Bálint Binder, Dániel Farkas, and Gergely Szűcs

Original Design by: Carlos Roa
Designed by: Max Keating

January 2026

Covers: Designed by Max Keating

Image: A sunset view over the Danube River, Budapest.
(Skelanard, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons)

DANUBE
INSTITUTE

Contents

DANUBE
INSTITUTE

About the Danube Institute

The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasizing the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with center-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic center-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

About the Authors

Bálint István Binder lives in Budapest and is a master's student in History at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), specializing in 19th–20th century international relations and globalization. His main areas of interest include cultural policy, cultural diplomacy, as well as international politics and geopolitics, with a particular focus on Central Europe. His research interests focus on examining the historical background of contemporary social and geopolitical issues.

Daniel is a historian. He received his master's degree in modern political and military history from the Károli Gáspár University of Budapest. He is now a PhD student at the university's doctoral school, focusing on the Cold War-era networks of Hungary and Latin America. Daniel's research areas at the Danube Institute concentrate on Hungary's place in globalization processes, its underlying geopolitical choices, and Central Europe's relations with Latin America.

Gergely is a Hungarian-American who completed an LL.B. at VU Amsterdam in the Netherlands and a completed the Saint Thomas Aquinas Ecumenical Academy for Public Life. Then worked for the Aquinói Szent Tamás Közéleti Egyesület (Saint Thomas Aquinas Public Life Association). He is currently completing his MA degree in International Water Governance and Water Diplomacy at the University of Public Service. His main research interests are water conflict, international water law, fluvial and maritime trade, related natural resources, irrigation and offshore pipelines. Gergely also focuses on Hungarian culture while bridging diaspora realities.

A River Runs Through It: The Danube River in Hungarian Strategy and Identity

Bálint Binder, Gergely Szűcs, and Dániel Farkas

Abstract

The paper examines the dynamics by which the Danube was conceptualized in Hungarian modernity as both a physical and a symbolic object of national identity and international trade. From the Compromise of 1867 to the present day, the river has been conceptualized both as an outlet to the sea and as an object that binds Central European nations and defines Hungary's environmental landscape. During the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the river was made navigable in its entirety for maritime access, while exiled Hungarians envisioned it as the central spine of Central European political cooperation. In the interwar period, it was an object that showed how surreal the system of tightly contained nation-states really was. During the Cold War, it served as a site of Socialist cooperation, which inadvertently also catalysed a significant anti-socialist protest movement. Today, it has potential for use in Hungary's new international trade concepts. Yet it could also remain an economic "backwater" while serving as an object of environmental beauty and national identity.

Introduction: River Systems and Geopolitics

The Danube, as Hungary's largest river, has long reflected in its calm waters the currents of geopolitical thought and national identity. It is an exciting analytical subject into which we can transpose the changing currents of Hungarian history and concepts about the uses of national territory. This paper proposes to do that.

Rivers are especially dynamic sites for writing such a history, which nevertheless reaches into the present. They are objects of stasis and mobility at once. They are marked on the map as immutable objects of geography, while being moving bodies of water that flow to the nearest major river or empty into the ocean. They are barriers and destinations as well: people of all ages need to find the nearest crossing through their overland routes, be it a ford or a steel bridge, but they are also drawn to them for freshwater and - although less and less so in modernity - nutrition provided by fish.

For people managing the various polities of the world, rivers offered vectors through which both commerce and war could be waged and, at the same time, presented well-marked boundaries for states. It is a truism in world history that river basins provided the central spine of early empires emerging from the Neolithic Age.

With the advent of modernity, rivers acquired new meanings in politics, the economy and society. They were, at times, celebrated by new nationalisms as symbols of the nation, as inherently one with an imagined essential, geographically marked and mapped community. They were vectors for even more trade, natural phenomena against which to build barriers and energy sources to generate new forms of power. One of the crucial phenomena of modernity regarding rivers is the provision of direction not only for commerce but also for geopolitical planning. With the advent of the bureaucratic, legible state, the inherent features of national territory came to be regarded as elements of technocratic prediction, planning and construction. The new phenomena inherently influenced international integration and regional strategy.

Already in the immediate geopolitical neighbourhood of Hungary, these patterns are readily discernible. Major river systems provided vectors of access to regions in modernity. The Rhine has long been a major trade route, but when Germany in the modern sense was born in 1871, the river assumed a new significance as it linked the new state to the global stage and supported its rapid industrialization. The confluence of the Ruhr Valley and the Rhine at the medieval city of Ruhrort (later part of Duisburg) became a critical point for German industry and transportation. This was one of the locations where the construction of riverine steamships commenced in Germany and this was where the railway first crossed the Rhine in 1848.[1] The Rhine became a crucial artery where the second industrial revolution, based on steel and heavy machinery, could move its inputs and outputs. It was also fortunate that it runs into the North Sea, providing Germany with almost direct access to Atlantic trade routes.

Consequently, the Rhine significantly increased Rotterdam's importance to the German economy and vice versa, linking the Netherlands to Germany. The bilateral link heavily influenced Dutch neutrality in the First World War.[2]

In this example, we see a river as an object of industrial development and heavy transport, but the international dimension was less complex than the Danube. When modernity arrived, the Rhine's human and international landscape was largely settled (aside from intra-German specificities).

Other rivers were much more moulded by conquest and empire. For an Eastern European example, the Dnieper (for Ukrainians, Dnipro) is illustrative. As the Rhine between French and German lands, the Dnieper, as a north-south axis, sat for centuries uneasily more or less in the zone of religious (or, if we take Huntington, even civilizational) break between Western Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Earlier, it provided less-remembered and celebrated, but still vital, routes for the Goth people and later the Varangians to penetrate the Black Sea basin and beyond.[3] On its banks, Kiev/Kyiv became a prominent political and, later, religious centre of Slavic life, dominating trade between the lower and upper sections of the river. Early modernity found it in the crosshairs of Russian imperial expansion.

When the Great Northern War ended in 1721, Russians dominated most of the river already, although its lower rapids were occupied by the vassal polity of the Cossacks of the Zaporozhian Host and the Ottoman vassal Crimean Tatars. The river was then a vector of imperial expansion to the Taurian Steppe and the Crimea south from its estuary. As the Russian conquest progressed, the river became the central transportation artery toward the "Novorossiya" of Empress Catherine.[4] The backbone of the new urban centres of Russian Ukraine was built along the river: first, present-day Dnipropetrovsk in 1776, then Kherson in 1778.[5] The

last Turkish forts near its estuary fell in 1791; thereafter, it was Russia's river up to the fall of the USSR. When the USSR came, it used the river as a blueprint for its industrialization program. The river was built up with dams downriver from Kiev, eliminating the rapids, making shipping viable and generating enormous electricity volumes with both hydropower and the nuclear reactors that it helped cool, among them the infamous Chernobyl power plant.[6]

The Dnieper, located on the southern periphery of Russian lands, shaped the formation of settlements and commerce within the newly integrated territories. We have now come full circle in the 2020s, as the river on its southern edges becomes a frontline and one of the old dams was destroyed by retreating Russians in the wake of the 2023 Ukrainian counterattack.[7]

We have now seen brief examples of classic Western and Eastern European types of major rivers playing a role in regional history. In Western Europe, we have seen the river as a backbone of integration between nation-states and as an artery for heavy industry. In Eastern Europe, a peripheral river was conquered and integrated, with the nomads gone, first by Imperial Russia and then by Soviet power. But how did the Danube, the central river of Hungary, which defines its geography and even the site of its capital city, feature in these grand narratives of geopolitical conversations? Does it feature at all? And how does it reflect on the creators of these narratives?

In our paper, we seek to discern the Danube as a topic and an object in Hungarian history. We will primarily present Hungarian perspectives, both in terms of long-term economic change and through the writings of specific thinkers. It will be shown how the country thought about its main fluvial artery and how the river figured in critical geopolitical processes, all in a quite simple chronological way. The story picks up after 1867, when downriver integration and planning for broader global economic cooperation began to figure prominently in Hungarian thinking. It will show what political concepts and economic projects were mapped onto the river in this period, and how it reflects contemporary Hungarian geopolitical thinking. Then it will move on to the interwar period, when the need for cooperation became clear to all parties. It will consider the Socialist-era processes and then arrive in the present day, where the river may again be an important economic corridor, or potentially remain a symbolic object of Central European belonging.

Monarchy Danube, 1867-1918: Globalization and Imperial Projects

At the time of the Compromise of 1867 between Hungary and the Habsburg Dynasty, many of the features that underpinned Hungary's vision of the Danube were already in place. The capitalist transformation of the country, in general, was already complete. The major rivers, among these the Danube, were regulated, and consequently extensive agriculture bloomed.

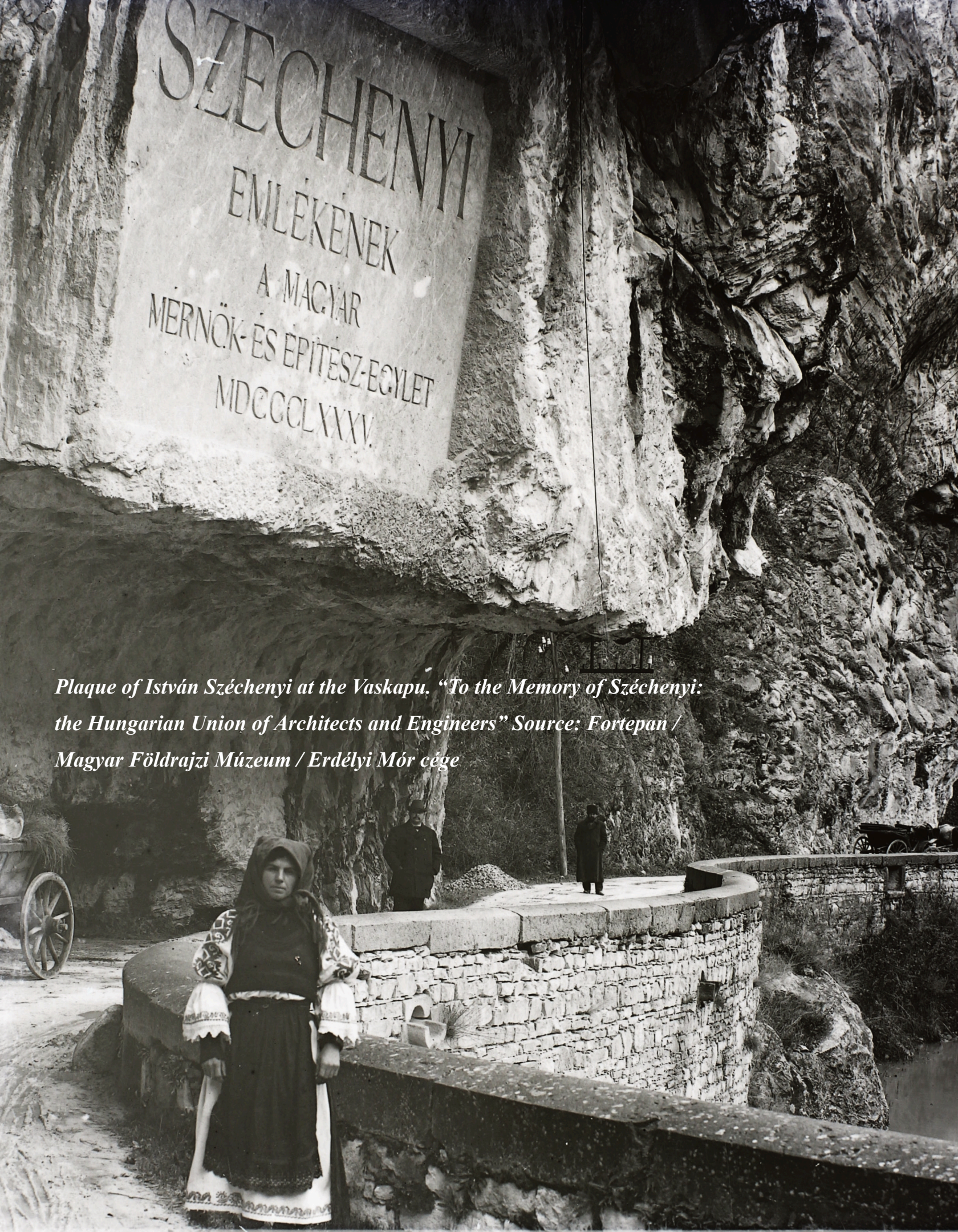
Not least, the idea of the Danube as the artery of capitalist transformation was already theorized in Hungarian political thought by Count István Széchenyi. He called the Danube, "A great channel of nature that appears to be created for the Hungarian nation,"[8] in the wake of the 1828-29 Russo-Turkish war. He argued that making commercial connections with other nations should be a core tool of nation-building in Hungary and that this should be achieved by opening the Danube to commercial navigation.

After the 1867 settlement, Hungarian policy on the Danube aimed at regulation and the opening of an additional trade channel to the outside world. The key point was to open the Vaskapu, "Iron Gates", a particularly problematic section full of rapids where the Danube intersects the Carpathian ranges. By 1867, a channel had already been opened in the Kazan straits, which alleviated some of the problems, but solving the whole issue was still far away, given that the Paris Treaty closing the Crimean War in 1856 defined the Danube as an international waterway without reference to how the regulation of the river worked. Finally, the Monarchy was granted the right to regulate the river, and Hungary seized the opportunity. The Vaskapu channel was completed in 1898, thereby making the river fully navigable.

It is important to note, however, that the concepts regarding the Danube focused on integrating Hungary into broader international trade, rather than the Balkans or the Black Sea basin. The newly independent Balkan states were less industrialized and of limited value, either as a market with purchasing power or as a source of raw materials.

There was only one theoretician who drew attention to the fact that the Danube could be not only a venue but also a symbolic unifying force in regional integration. This was Lajos Kossuth, one of the leaders of the 1848-49 national revolution of Hungary. Writing from his exile in Italy, he conceptualized a Danube Valley Confederation. He asserted that the essential failure of the Hungarian revolution was its inability to offer a satisfactory settlement to its nationalities inside its borders, although plans were circulating, for example for the union of Romania and Hungary. He thought that in an ideal future, the small nations of Central Europe could find themselves in this federation, which was to be something akin to the later Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in structure: a federation of autonomous states with a common army, foreign policy and some financial affairs.[9] Yet Kossuth and his circle had no say in Hungarian issues (not the least by his own choice), and this concept remained on paper.

Strategies in this period reflect Hungarian concentration on international trade and modernity, set not on its immediate neighbourhood but on the world market, understood broadly. But the Danube was also an area in which Hungary could assert its interests before the early multilateral institutions came into being.



Plaque of István Széchenyi at the Vaskapu. "To the Memory of Széchenyi: the Hungarian Union of Architects and Engineers" Source: Fortepan / Magyar Földrajzi Múzeum / Erdélyi Mór cége

1918-1945: Post-Empire Danube and the Nation-States

The First World War and the empire's collapse shattered the Danube's integrated regime. In 1919–20, peace settlements carved the Danube basin among new nation-states. Hungary lost over 70% of its territory, including most of its Danubian watershed, as its Carpathian peripheries went to Czechoslovakia and Romania, and the South to Yugoslavia. After 1920, the entire lower Danube, a couple of dozen kilometres south of the city of Mohács, lay in Romania and the new Yugoslavia, and even the section north of Budapest was split between Czechoslovakia (Slovakia) and Austria. In effect, Hungary became landlocked, with only the upper Danube (to Komárno/Komárom) and the Dunajec branches remaining under its control. Access to the Black Sea via Sulina now passed through Romanian territory. Austrian (now the Austrian Republic) shipping faced similar issues: the new Hungary no longer controlled the route to the Black Sea. The vibrant grain-export economy of the prewar Great Plain of Hungary had to find new outlets crossing foreign territory. The Danube, which once had been "Vienna's ally" in receiving Hungarian crops, now cut through multiple sovereign borders.

This rupture sparked new thinking about the river's role, reverting, in a way, to the concepts of Kossuth. Count Pál Teleki, geographer and Hungary's postwar prime minister, warned that the small Danubian states would face hardships if they did not coordinate. He saw the Danube as an integrative artery that could bind the new Central European states economically, helping them compensate for the loss of hinterlands. (Unfortunately, detailed sources on Teleki's Danube ideas are sparse in the literature reviewed; interwar Hungarian policy did, however, frequently invoke the Danube's potential as a uniting factor.) In practical terms, Hungary and its neighbours explored ambitious projects to adapt to the new borders. For example, Hungarian engineers and allied Yugoslav planners proposed linking the Danube watershed more directly to the Adriatic. (Separately, the 1930s saw proposals to join the Danube-Tisza region to Marseilles via the Tisza–Oder or Danube–Oder canals, though these never materialized.) In the immediate vicinity, Hungary began modernizing its remaining Danube stretch and rail networks to reach Romania and Czechoslovakia.

International legal arrangements also shifted. The 1856 Paris Danube Conference (held following Austria's defeat by Russia) had originally internationalized navigation by establishing a Danube Commission under multilateral control. That regime lapsed in the First World War, but the postwar allies revived free navigation at the 1921 Belgrade Conference. The 1921 "international regime" restored an international Danube Commission, though now with new riparian states (Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, etc.) and without the older Great Power overseers. The Commission was based on mutual access: for example, the Belgrade Convention explicitly reaffirmed free, equal navigation for all signatories. Hungary was a charter member, ensuring it retained at least a legal voice in river affairs. Despite territorial losses, Hungary hoped that participation in the Danube regime might help preserve trade flows (for instance, shipping Hungarian goods through foreign ports under international guarantee). In practice, however, the river's new political geography – winding through emerging nationalist states – made management more complex. Still, the existence of the revived Danube Commission offered a framework in which Hungary, now a smaller state, could collaborate with its neighbours on dredging, locks, customs and shipping rules.

Early use of the river under the new order was uneven. Some cross-border ventures took place: for example, joint Hungary–Romania talks in the 1930s considered developing larger seaports on the Lower Danube (at Sulina and Galați) and improving the Budapest-Bucharest rail link to compensate for lost Danube frontage. But the Great Depression and political tensions limited progress. Overall, the interwar Danube became a less potent artery of prosperity than during the era of the monarchy. Many historians note that the Little Entente and related blocs (which included Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Romania) favoured railroads connecting capitals, whereas Hungary, cut off from the Adriatic and Black Sea, lamented the missed opportunities of rivers. By 1940–45, wartime instability again disrupted all navigation, effectively ending this period's river-driven integration. From August 1944, a Soviet flotilla operated on the Danube, slowly crawling its way to Hungary and then to Austria in the spring of 1945.[10] The river's portion flowing North to South, from Esztergom to Eszék, was intended to be a significant part of the Third Reich's defence against Soviet and allied forces. Still, it was breached relatively quickly, although with high casualties. One of the great Soviet war memorials of the region is now situated at Batina, in present-day Serbia, where the Soviets first managed to cross the river under German fire in November 1944. After all, the Danube was taken by force and its lower portion integrated into Moscow's geopolitical orbit.

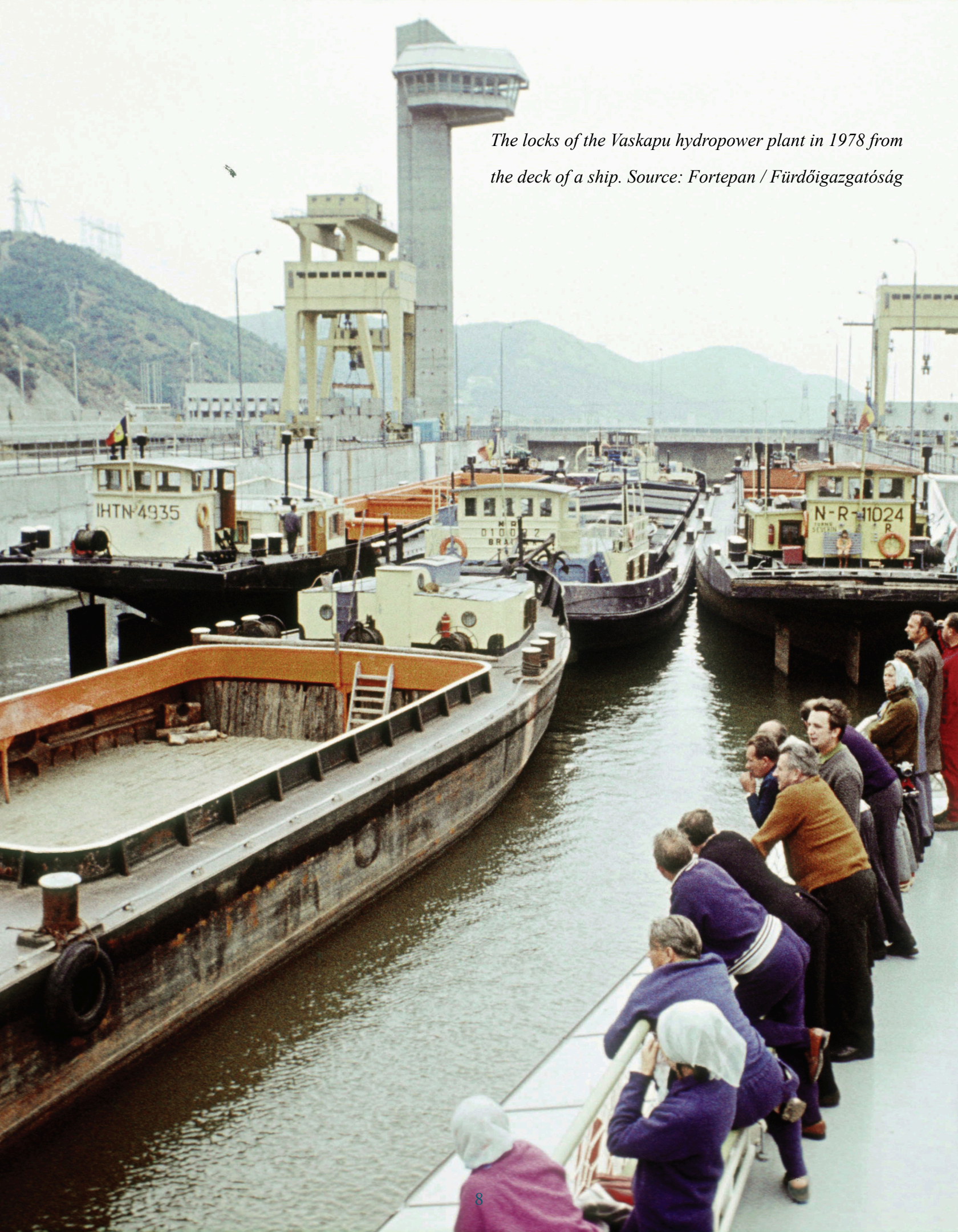
A seafaring Hungarian ship crosses the arc of the Margaret Bridge in 1937. Source: Fortepan / Magyar Műszaki és Közlekedési Múzeum / Történeti Fényképek Gyűjteménye / Ganz gyűjtemény

1945-1990: The Danube in the Soviet Era

After World War II, the Danube flowed predominantly through the Eastern Bloc, entering from Austria at Dévény. In 1948, the newly established communist regimes signed the Belgrade Convention on Danube navigation, thereby establishing the modern Danube Commission. This treaty (effective from May 1949) enshrined free and equal navigation from Ulm to the Black Sea for all signatories, echoing the prewar principle but now enforced by a regime dominated by Soviet-aligned states (USSR, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary). A new Commission (based in Budapest) was formed to "maintain and improve navigation conditions" on the entire Danube. Hungary's role in this body was significant: it was an original member and even hosted the Commission's secretariat. The Commission's stated duties included unifying traffic rules and data collection across the river. In practice, the Cold War curtailed broader international involvement, but the legal framework still guaranteed Hungary equal rights on the Danube waterway.

Economically, the Eastern Bloc placed heavy emphasis on industrial and rail development, but the Danube remained important for bulk shipping. Several joint projects illustrate this. The most famous is the Iron Gate hydroelectric system between Romania and Yugoslavia, whose first dam (Iron Gate I) was completed in 1972. This Soviet-backed, multi-decade engineering feat not only generated power but "quadrupled the annual tonnage of shipping" through one of Europe's most constricted river gorges. It created navigation locks that allowed much larger barges to traverse that stretch. In effect, Yugoslavia (which by then was non-aligned) and socialist Romania together invested in the Danube's capacity. Downriver, Hungary and Czechoslovakia benefited indirectly as well, receiving increased electricity and more reliable water levels. Geopolitics still complicated Danube-related cooperation. Yugoslavia's split from Stalin's Eastern Bloc in 1948 meant it was formally outside Soviet institutions (COMECON, Warsaw Pact). It consequently approached Danube projects more bilaterally, as seen in the Iron Gate collaboration, which largely excluded the USSR and other Comecon countries. Hungary itself, firmly in the Soviet orbit, sometimes felt disadvantaged by rates and allocations set at the Danube Commission (often engineered by bigger Communist powers). For example, studies of the early commission note disputes over freight rates and personnel positions that frustrated Hungarian planners (and much more so Yugoslav leaders). Romania under Ceaușescu pursued a nationalist course after 1968, yet it too saw the Danube as vital for industry and trade. For instance, Ceaușescu's regime promoted the Danube Port of Braila development, aiming to make it a second Black Sea outlet.
Overall, the Soviet era saw the Danube managed primarily within the socialist economic framework. Trade on the river linked Bulgarian oil, Romanian grain, Hungarian bauxite and Yugoslav metals to downstream industrial centres. Navigation was facilitated by the communist system, which involved most states, but the patterns were different from earlier times: navigation was tightly regulated and subordinated to five-year plans. For Hungary, the Danube remained its "only inland waterway outlet" into the Balkans; Budapest maintained cargo terminals and a fishing fleet on the river. But the Iron Curtain limited Western investment on the river until the 1990s. Still, one lasting legacy of the Cold War era was the 1948 Convention and Commission, which provided a neutralist legal basis that Hungary and all Danube states would continue to use after 1990.

Before the fall of Communism, the Danube once again became an object of dissident political expression for Hungarians. This time it was to highlight the inefficiency, waste and crude modernism of the Communist regime through environmental protest. In 1977, Czechoslovakia and Hungary signed a bilateral treaty to construct a dual river cascade system by establishing dams at Bős (Gabčíkovo) by the Czechoslovaks and at Nagymaros by the Hungarians. Water levels could have been controlled more effectively and substantially more hydropower could have been generated. In Hungary, however, the Nagymaros dam would have covered one of its most valuable environmental sites, the Dunakanyar (Danube Bend), a major weekend destination for inhabitants of the capital. There are still some professional debates about the potential effects of a Nagymaros dam. Still, the point was that the Hungarians protested to defend their homeland, as embodied in its beautiful environment, against the grey concrete of Socialist modernity. The 1986-88 protests against the dam became one of the most critical protests against the Socialist system alongside those advocating for the Hungarian minorities in Erdély (Transylvania).[11] The Hungarian government cancelled the Hungarian part of the project in 1989, while the Czechoslovaks built theirs, diverting part of the Danube for the hydropower plant channel.



The locks of the Vaskapu hydropower plant in 1978 from the deck of a ship. Source: Fortepan / Fürdőigazgatóság

1990 To the Present: The Danube as an Economic Corridor

Now that the historical development of the Danube as a geopolitical object has been discussed, the river's current place in the global order must also be placed into context. In terms of fluvial tradeways: future potential and current use. The Danube River is a concrete representation of generational and regional tensions, as well as the high level of cooperation it provides a forum for. Goods have flowed up and down its snaking, glittering body, nourishing the communities of a wide variety of inhabitants.

Today, the question which must be posed is how such a fluvial body can be connected to the developing roads of current economic trade routes.

With the end of the Cold War and the eastward expansion of the European Union, the Danube's role has once again shifted toward integration. In EU transport planning, the Danube forms the backbone of the Rhine–Danube Corridor, one of the Trans-European Network (TEN-T) priority axes connecting the "continental European countries" from France and Germany to the Black Sea. Specifically, the Main-Rhine-Danube inland waterway now links Strasbourg and Frankfurt through Vienna, Budapest and on to Constanța. The European Commission notes that this inland connection (Danube plus related rivers) is "the backbone of inland navigation between north-western European basins and the south-eastern Black Sea". In other words, the Danube is now officially envisioned as the axis of a modern Pan-European transport system: in concrete terms, this means EU funding and projects (ports, locks, dredging) are targeted along the river.

Hungary has eagerly positioned itself at the centre of these developments. Hungarian strategists often tout the country as a logistic hub or "keystone" of Eurasian trade, capitalizing on its location along the Danube corridor.[12]

For example, Budapest has upgraded its river port facilities and intermodal terminals to handle container and bulk cargo coming down the Danube from downstream (and from the Black Sea). Hungarian proposals emphasise improved rail and road connections from ports such as Budapest, Baja and Győr to Central Europe and beyond, so that Danube-borne goods can be readily distributed to Western markets. Similarly, Hungarian policy papers highlight the potential of linking the Danube corridor to the prospective "New Silk Road" routes from Asia.[13] While much of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) traffic enters Europe via Poland or the Balkans, some analyses (e.g. Carlos Roa's "Golden Road" concept) suggest that Trieste or Constanța should serve as gateways to Central Europe. Hungary has lobbied to ensure that the Danube figures in these plans.

The question, from a Danubian perspective, is how the river can be effectively and durably integrated into this loop. Since both routes lead to the same area, they could both be connected to the River's system. It is far more obvious with the New Silk Road, which passes through the Anatolian Peninsula and into Europe via the Balkans. This means that it naturally crosses the Black Sea, making the Danube a straightforward connection. The New Golden Road is much further West, entering the Adriatic Sea and some ports around that area; which specific one is still debated, such as Trieste, Koper and Rijeka.[14] The only way this route may be intersected is if some of the trade shifts further north and crosses toward the Black Sea. Therefore, this aspect is a different topic of discussion.

The State of the Danube River

This is a key issue for Hungary, as it is the channel through which a substantial volume of cargo may flow, bringing trade and other beneficial relations. The nation has already forged a strong strategy of connectivity based on the continuous expansion of international relations.[15] The integration into East-West economic corridors could lead to a further large-scale upswing in the Hungarian economy. Regarding our subject's role in this, the issues are the current state of the Danube and, to some extent, its positioning. This problem lies partly in the state of its infrastructure and its potential for large-scale commercial shipping. The river has become challenging to navigate due to outdated docking installations, shallow waterways, rapid flooding and narrow passes. Mass navigation of the Danube with large cargo volumes and the vessels required to carry such loads is highly challenging in certain sections. Yet, it can be asserted that some effort to connect the New Silk Road fluvially to the Black Sea coast is feasible and would be advantageous.

The Black Sea Canal's Potential and Infrastructural Development

A key issue in the large-scale use of the Danube River is whether the largely post-communist infrastructure remains adequate today. These structures were built after the onset of communism in Romania, the most famous one being the Danube Black Sea Canal.[16] This was a major project of the

regime aimed at demonstrating its capability to promote modernity and progress. The canal is still in use today. It transports large volumes of cargo up onto the Danube River, but it is outdated. With the collapse of Socialism, many of its creations decayed.[17] The canal was built at a good specification for use, its breadth being 90 metres, its depth a good 7 metres and bridge clearance 16.5 metres.[18] All of these reflect a passage safe for navigating larger vessels. The canal of Northern Branch Poarta Albă–Midia also plays a vital role for smaller barges with its much smaller breadth to transport resources to the Danube, easing the congestion of the central canal.[19]

Yet there is the problem of continuous maintenance, from providing better equipment for mooring and better night lighting to updating locks in various ways.[20] Numerous items would need to be completed for effective shipping. For example, it was proposed in 2022 to update most sections of both canals and to dredge 10,000 square metres of landslide debris, underscoring the scale of the task. Evidence of the difficulty of the situation regarding infrastructure maintenance is the persistent failure to construct the Bucharest-Danube Canal.[21] The site's fifth attempt at completion in 2023 remains ongoing, indicating a challenging, stalled project.[22]

Recent EU assessments stress the need for navigational improvements. The Rhine–Danube Corridor strategy identifies that "the navigability of the Danube River must be improved in order to offer a real modal choice for freight transport." Bottlenecks persist in the upper and middle Danube (e.g. Austria–Slovakia–Hungary). In response, the Commission has funded pilot projects to enhance river flows around Vienna and Bratislava, and studies in Hungary have identified interventions at dozens of shallow sections (though environmental reviews have delayed some works). In summary, the late-20th/early 21st-century vision is to transform the Danube into a freely navigable, multimodal corridor matching Northern Europe's inland waterways. For Hungary, this represents an opportunity: a fully upgraded Danube corridor could restore some of the country's old role as an exporter of its agricultural and manufactured goods, now under EU conditions. It also means that Hungary could serve as the hub of a broad logistics network, linking Black Sea and Adriatic ports to Central European markets. Recent national studies and strategic documents underscore this: they propose to exploit the Danube for trans-European connectivity, whether by upgrading navigation to class VI (to enable large barges to reach Budapest) or by creating industrial zones along the river with rail links to Germany, Italy and Turkey.]

International Cooperation and Institutions

By the 21st century, the Danube's legal regime had become highly institutionalized. The central body is the International Danube Commission (IDC), whose modern form was established in 1948 by seven Danubian states (USSR, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia). The Commission – now headquartered in Budapest – is charged with maintaining and improving navigation on the Danube from its source to the Black Sea. Importantly, it replaced earlier bodies that had included Western powers, but its founding document reasserted the principle of equality. Article 1 of the 1948 Convention explicitly declares that "Navigation on the Danube shall be free and open for the nationals, vessels of commerce and goods of all States, on a footing of equality". In practice, this means that any Danubian country (including Hungary) can send its vessels anywhere between Ulm and Sulina, subject only to shared regulations. Thus, Hungary's participation in the IDC – in its current membership with Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine – gives it an enduring voice in setting navigation rules (e.g. pilotage standards, traffic signs, customs procedures).

The IDC has a long institutional lineage. Its immediate predecessor, the Danube River Commission, was established by the Paris Conference of 1856 (following the Crimean War) to ensure free navigation from the Iron Gates to the east. That regime lapsed during the First World War, but was revived at the 1921 Belgrade Conference (with Albania also joining). The current Commission's founding in 1948 built on those traditions, which were "among the first attempts at internationalizing the powers of sovereign states for a common cause". Notably, all three key conferences (Paris 1856, Belgrade 1921, Belgrade 1948) took place immediately after major conflicts, indicating that the Danube's internationalization was seen as essential for regional stability each time. Throughout the Cold War and continuing today, Hungary has been a consistent Commission member (joining on 11 May 1949). Even the reunified Germany and new states like Slovakia and Ukraine eventually joined, but Hungary never lost its seat. (The only country for which the Danube is relevant but not on the modern Commission is Turkey, since the convention covers only up to the Sulina mouth.)

In addition to the Danube Commission, Hungary engages with other Danube-related institutions. The ICPDR (International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, founded in 1994) addresses water quality and the environment; Hungary is an active participant. Hungarian experts serve on working groups addressing pollution, flood management and ecological flow, indicating that Danube governance now extends beyond navigation to the

integrated management of the river basin. Moreover, the EU's Danube Strategy (2011–2020, renewed to 2030) mobilizes additional intergovernmental cooperation. Hungary has used these frameworks to coordinate with Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia and others on projects such as flood control on the Tisza (a Danube tributary) and habitat restoration along the riverbanks. In summary, the Danube today is governed by a robust network of treaties and bodies – principally the Danube Commission for navigation and related legal regimes – in which Hungary is fully embedded. This institutional legacy means that Hungary can both shape and be constrained by river policies, a direct result of centuries of international practice from the 1856 Paris Treaty to the present.

International law now ensures equal Danube navigation, but it has not made the waterway apolitical. While the IDC's 1948 Convention sets the rules, actual projects still require bilateral and multilateral coordination. For instance, each significant river bend or port often involves joint Hungarian–Austrian, Hungarian–Slovak, or Hungarian–Serbian agreements (depending on its location). Hungary has historically sought to use the Commission to modernize its river ports – for example, pushing for the removal of locks in the Sip Canal so that bigger freighters can pass – and to assert its rights as a riparian state. Likewise, when Hungary joined the EU in 2004, the Danube Treaty regime began aligning gradually with EU internal market rules (though the Danube Commission remains a separate entity from EU governance). Today, Hungarian diplomats and engineers work with their Romanian, Bulgarian and Serbian counterparts under the auspices of IDC to harmonize pilotage fees and customs screening, and to develop new logistics hubs. In effect, the Danube Commission and related bodies function as continuing reminders that, despite new nation-states, the Danube remains a shared resource requiring shared management – a legacy of the river's geopolitical history.

The Issue of Environmental Degradation in the Danube Delta

The most important section for linking the Danube to the East-West corridors is the lower portion, or Lower Danube, as referred to hereafter. The Lower Danube area comprises countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine. A vast delta has formed around this area due to the River's exit into the Black Sea. The three main navigable channels to traverse the waterway from this area are Romania's Sfantu Gheorghe, Chilia and Sulina branches. Of these three, the Sulina branch is most navigable for commercial shipping and larger freighters in general. Notably, the delta area is massive. It holds 1,700 km of navigable courses, the same as the total length of the natural watercourses of the River.[23] It would, therefore, be entirely possible for ships, even commercial ones, to penetrate the main course of the River through these paths. They could easily navigate the Sulina branch or, further south, the Sfantu Gheorghe.

What is preventing large freighters from entering this territory? It should be noted that there are certain difficulties, such as the area's legal regulations, as it is officially a protected natural reservation. These environmental facilities are subject to stringent regulations governing pollution and commercial traffic. The Ramsar Wetlands Convention, together with its UNESCO World Heritage status, other Romanian environmental regulations, the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) and the Black Sea Commission, among others, ensures the protection of these wetlands. Environmental regulations are a significant impediment to large-scale use. Such commercial use would largely preclude ecotourism (one of the primary uses now) by rendering the environment unenjoyable. Who would want to visit a downtrodden, degraded, oily, waterlogged environment, especially if they knew what it had been like before?

The Risk of Water Level on the Danube River

Another important consideration is the Danube's high flood risk, particularly in northern regions and the Upper Danube.[24] The Danube is an alpine river in its upper sections. The water here crashes over stone and falls from high elevations, attaining great velocity. This is only amplified in late spring, when significant snowmelt occurs. This aspect has been largely mitigated over time; numerous dykes and dams have been constructed along the Upper Danube. The purpose of these was to block the crashing water, especially during winter, when ice chunks often obstructed the River and caused highly dangerous ice-jam floods. The past year is a fine example of how often floods still can and do happen on the River, even with all the security measures in place. Hungary suffered a flood in the summer of 2024, from melting and rain, where according to the OVF or the Hungarian General Directorate for Water Management, 946.8 km of protection had to be installed.[25] Other than floods, highly intense droughts occur during Central European summers. This results in periods when the water level is particularly low, creating problems for shipping. In recent years, severe droughts have caused extremely low water levels across the Danube region, rendering the River untraversable.

From a Hungarian Perspective

The entire analysis centres on the premise that it would be highly advantageous for Hungary to be deeply connected to the New Silk Road network. In many respects, this is a good

opportunity for the country to enhance its waterborne trade flows. Therefore, for the country, it would be of very high value for the Danube River to be connected to the main networks. Budapest could thereby become one of the major hubs of trade and connection along the Danube. Budapest is towards the middle of the Danube and it is largely well navigable to this point in terms of breadth or depth. Thus, all boats transiting upstream or downstream would have to pass through the city. This would create a useful fluvial corridor in the middle of the zone, helping the area to flourish economically. At present, however, the Hungarian shipping industry is at an all-time low and still in decline. The use of the Danube docks has declined by a significant amount in the past two years.[26] It can be concluded that this aspect could be strengthened to enable larger-scale trade, since the River is capable and Budapest has every advantage, both manmade and natural, to become a far more significant fluvial trade hub. As already mentioned, however, the immediate concern is not Hungarian facilities: it is access to the Danube through the Black Sea, which is a separate question. If freighters could cruise up the River from the entry point, Hungary would benefit immensely.

Current Statistics about the Trade on the Danube River

Current trade statistics along the Danube River are much less impressive than those of the Rhine, one of the most industrially and efficiently used rivers in Europe. One aspect that is clear from the discrepancy between the nations is the volume of container transport in 2024. In 2024, all Danube ports on inland waterways in total had 58.9 million tons of cargo,[27] whereas in the same year, the traditional Rhine ports had 106.3 million tons in inland waterway cargo transport.[28] This includes only the major traditional ports; many others are also significant. This does not include the Dutch ports producing a total of 278.4 tons of cargo in 2024 or the Belgian and French with 202.6 tons.[29] This still does not make up the total number: there is a substantial gap between regions in infrastructure and in the utilization of this infrastructure for trade. The waterways in Western Europe are used far more and designed to handle bulk cargo, whereas the Danube's infrastructure is less well developed. This does not mean, however, that the infrastructure cannot be developed to handle far more trade if it is connected to a route that facilitates it, just as the Rhine's cargo was accelerated by the massive seaports near its estuary, Rotterdam and Antwerp. The same could happen to the Danube, potentially if the Black Sea were integrated into the River's network. All that is to say, there is considerable potential for the river to increase its cargo capacity.

Potential uses of the Danube

As a general conclusion, the threat against natural habitats, limited accessibility and lack of well-maintained infrastructure make the Black Sea-Danube route somewhat difficult to utilize for large-scale shipping. Yet this does not mean that it is impossible. With concerted effort, significant improvements may be achieved in environmental protection zones (the situation is currently satisfactory) and in the renewal of waterways for substantial use. That being said, the Danube River can be connected to the New Silk Road as its extension, since it can handle a decent capacity of trade (in 2023 delivering over 20 million tonnes and in 2024, 18 million tonnes of freight transport just through the Black Sea-Danube Canal) even in its current state.[30] [31] The opportunity could attract significant international business attention, funding and innovation to stabilize the route, given that such intensive use of the river would benefit multiple actors within and outside Europe.

If no such major use spike develops, the Danube can remain an ever more calm and tranquil place for tourists. It would benefit the habitats of a wide range of animals living in and around the River. This would in turn be beneficial for a rustic experience or fishing. Still, it is not ideal for the region's economy and could lead to a loss of economic and connectional opportunities for Hungary. Even if the New Silk Road could make use of the Danube, it would only partly utilize the waterway, which means that, most likely, no completely destructive transformation would occur in the waterway. Therefore, the more natural areas with no docks or opportunities for ships to stop would remain largely intact, preserving their natural character and calm.
The only factor which could radically alter the natural environment is the comprehensive overhaul of the riverbed to accommodate large-scale traffic. This process could involve actions such as dredging, widening the river's channel, or straightening the watercourse.

Conclusion

The Danube, since the dawn of modernity in Central Europe, reflected – and also directed – how the Hungarians tried to interact with the outside world. It was first an imagined route toward world markets – and, for some, regional cooperation. It then became the object that drove international cooperation even in the tense interwar period. The Socialist era brought even more high modernity, but at the same time, protest.

The Danube can once again be in the spotlight if international trade demands it. But Hungary and the Danube are not solely defined by national GDP and the density of its international connections. It is also a phenomenon of environmental beauty, sites of culture and history that can anchor identities, and a symbolic chain that binds together European nations, regardless of how many ships sail on it. The Hungarian nation's use of the Danube today should strike a balance between the two to ensure that the country is a worthy steward of a national symbol.

References

1. James Harvey Jackson, *Migration and urbanization in the Ruhr Valley, 1821-1914* (Humanities Press, 1997), 128.already dominated most of the river, but its lower rapids were occupied by the vassal polity of the Cossacks of the Zaporozhian Host

2. Maartje M. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral: The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 30–35.

3. Roman Adrian Cybriwsky, *Along Ukraine's River: A Social and Environmental History of the Dnipro* (Central European University Press, 2018), 39-41.

4. Cybriwsky, *Along Ukraine's River,* 59-69.

5. Ibid.

6. Cybriwsky, *Along Ukraine's River,* 82-86.

7. The New York Times, "Why the Evidence Suggests Russia Blew Up the Kakhovka Dam" 16 June 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/06/16/world/europe/ukraine-kakhovka-damannerhen turnm-collapse.html

8. "azon természeti nagy csatorna, mely Magyarország számára látszik alkotva lenni…" quoted by Zsigmond Pál Pach, "Széchenyi és az Al-Duna szabályozásának kezdete" *História* 2, no. 4 (1980): 120-123.

9. Róbert Hermann, "Kossuth konföderációs koncepciója. A magyar emigráció elképzelései az együttélés újraszabályozására, 1849-1867' *Rubicon* 29, no.2 4-17, 12. https://epa.oszk.hu/03100/03122/00023/pdf/EPA03122_rubicon_2018_02_004-017.pdf

10. "Szovjet Dunai Katonai Flottilla" in *Magyarország a második világháborúban: Lexikon A-Zs.* ed. Péter Sipos. (Petit Real, 1997) https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-magyarorszag-a-masodik-vilaghaboruban-lexikon-a-zs-F062E/s-sz-F0D5A/szovjet-dunai-katonai-flottilla-F0DE1/ Accessed 28 November 2025

11. See a good collection of primary sources at "1988. május 27. - Tüntetés Budapesten a bős-nagymarosi vízlépcső megépítése ellen" Tüntetésarchívum, accessed 28 November, 2025, https://tuntetes-archivum.hu/1988.05.27

12. Carlos Roa: "Hungary's Indo-Mediterranean Strategy: Navigating the New Golden Road" *Danube Institute,*, 13 June 2025, 4. danubeinstitute.hu/en/research/hungary-s-indo-mediterranean-strategy-navigating-the-new-golden-road

13. Cheung Kong Graduate School of Business, *"The New Silk Road Route"* (CKGSB Knowledge, 2023).

14. Roa: "Hungary's Indo-Mediterranean Strategy", 23.

15. Ibid. 20.

16. Constantin Iordachi, *"Socialist infrastructure and its afterlife: Romania's Danube–Black Sea Canal"* in *Flowing Progress: Transforming the Danube Through Infrastructure*, ed. Stefan Dorondel and Luminiţa Gatejel, (Purdue University Press, 2025), 199.

17. Danube Commission, *"Maintenance works Danube-Black Sea Canal and Northern Branch Poarta Albă–Midia Canal"* (presentation by Administration of the Navigable Canals, 2023).

18. Ibid.

19. Compania Naţională Administraţia Canalelor Navigabile, *Paper Chart of Danube–Black Sea Canal and Poarta Albă–Midia Năvodari Canal* (ACN, 2021).

20. Danube Commission, *"Maintenance works Danube-Black Sea Canal and Northern Branch Poarta Albă–Midia Canal"* (presentation by Administration of the Navigable Canals, 2023).

21. Ibid.

22. Constantin Iordachi, *"Socialist infrastructure and its afterlife: Romania's Danube–Black Sea Canal"* in *Flowing Progress: Transforming the Danube Through Infrastructure*, ed. Stefan Dorondel and Luminiţa Gatejel, (Purdue University Press, 2025), 199-200.

23. International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, *"Navigation"* (ICPDR Water-Users, accessed 26 November 2025).

24. Gertrud Haidvogl, Severin Hohensinner, and Martin Schmid, "Disturbance on the Upper Danube: A Long-Term Socio-Ecological Perspective on Floods," in *Flowing Progress: Transforming the Danube Through Infrastructure*, ed. Stefan Dorondel and Luminiţa Gatejel (Purdue University Press, 2025), 267–302, accessed December 14, 2025, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/jj.32657614.15. 271.

25. General Directorate of Water Management (Hungary), "Significant Flood Protection Measures Were Carried Out on the Danube, Rába and Pinka River in June in Hungary," *Országos Vízügyi Főigazgatóság* press release, July 19, 2024, accessed December 14, 2025, https://www.ovf.hu/en/news/press-news/significant-flood-protection-measures-were-carried-out-on-the-danube-raba-and-pinka-river-in-june-in-hungar

26. Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (KSH), – *Summary table of vital statistics* (KSH-STADAT, accessed 12 December 2025).

27. Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine (CCNR), *Annual Report 2025*, report (Strasbourg: CCNR, 2025), accessed December 14, 2025. 102.

28. Ibid. 94.

29. Ibid. 98-100.

30. Danube Commission, *"Market observation for Danube navigation"* (Danube Commission, accessed 27 November 2025) 28.

31. Danube Commission, *Market Observation for Danube Navigation 2024*, report (Budapest: Danube Commission, 2025), accessed December 14, 2025, 32.


elanard