

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON INLAND NAVIGATION IN THE 21st CENTURY
CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND BEST PRACTICES
Pittsburgh, 3 – 5 October 2005.

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S T A T E M E N T

By

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PRESIDENT OF THE DANUBE COMMISSION

Pittsburgh, 4 October 2005

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Geologists maintain that the present configuration of the Danube river basin was shaped some 5 million years ago and it has not changed much since. Well, the Danube was born to last and it will, if the people who flocked to its shores and nursed the first buds of culture 8 000 years ago manage this gift of God prudently.

The recent tragedy of New Orleans that shocked and saddened us all demonstrated once again the strange, nay, the moody, ways of nature and its intrinsic forces. The Government of my country, the state union of Serbia and Montenegro, has asked me to transmit at this eminent Conference its commiseration for that wonderful city's loss of human life and its sympathies with the victims, their families and the people of the United States, as well as its readiness to help.

Mr. Chairman,

Our Conference presents us an opportunity to air some of our bolder thoughts on rivers, wareways and human abodes on their shores. From the philosophical point of view, we have difficulties in projecting future. Scientific methodology is way of our aspiration to uncover the determinisms that shape up the future. And yet, projecting future, as much as it is possible on the basis of verified knowledge, and the struggle to sustain the contours of our future development and prevent disasters are deeply rooted in human nature and will forever stoke the flames of our learned interest. Much has already been said about it at this Conference. Experts will enlighten us of what has been verifiably learned and tested; I have defined my brief, however, as giving some daring indications of the context in which the challenge "the Danube in the Twenty-First Century" might be considered, medium- and long-term.

Civilizations emerge along the shores of big rivers and those rivers shape their identities. It is therefore no surprise that the Danube is an ancient archetype of Europe's self-understanding, even less that generations of European children (and many of our American friends would gladly agree with them) have thought that America is to be best experienced sailing down the Mississippi onboard a steamboat with Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn as tour guides. The Danube and its tributaries hide, and sometimes reveal, the complexities of the life of the people of their towns and cities: Musil's *Man without Qualities* muses about the human condition in a city *an der Donau*, while Ivo Andrić's, my country's only Nobel Prize laureate's *Bridge over the Drina*, chronicles the vicissitudes of Bosnia's hardy souls through parts of its tempestuous history. And the examples are galore. I've picked up only a few to portray the overall cultural background and the way of thinking in Europe, particularly in our part of Europe, about the Danube and of the host of associations that they evoke.

The following circumstances could shape our approach to Europe's second largest river and the longest waterway in the years to come:

1. The Danube has been loved and sung about, but not sufficiently explored. The Danube river basin stretches to 18 countries on 800.000 square kilometres, the area comparable to the combined territories of France and Great Britain or, for that matter, of Texas and Louisiana. Small surprise that it abounds in flora and fauna of almost countless types and varieties, in minerals and other riches of a limitless economic potential. To protect and promote it as a waterway or an economic agglomeration, as a tourist destination or a nature reserve, we need a systematic, inter-disciplinary and long-term study. Whenever pressed by elements, we realize that we still do not know the Danube and its moods. This year, for instance, Romania and parts of my country, (lower course) riparian States, have been hit by "centennial floods". This phenomenon is scientifically unaccounted for, wherefore we tend to describe it in euphemisms. Recently, Germany and Austria, (upper course) riparian States, too, were also flooded. Damage is enormous. Apart from the fears that the floods are the first consequences of global warming, it is also thought that they were caused, at least in the river's lower course, by logging and deforestation and the consequent offset of the balance of a delicate eco-system. For a variety of reasons, logging is particularly extensive in countries in transition. Reforestation in the context of addressing climate aberrations and their consequences, on the other hand, is a hundred-year project and a fitting assignment for all involved in the century ahead of us.

2. The Danube is a large economic potential. By and large, the discussion at the Conference centred on inland waterways, their expansion and optimum use, and for a good reason. The recent EFIN study, an impressive work that enhances our knowledge and understanding of the problem, provides a lot of data and many projections that confirm our assumptions that European rivers are great economic opportunities. Although the study relates to the period till 2025, it gives hints of future development deeper into the century. All riparian States believe that the Danube will be part of a unified network of European inland waterways. It would take a lot of misfortune to get this project off-rail. With all due respect for the new European political mentality, let me point to two outstanding issues.

Transition has already been mentioned as a general economic and political framework that determines, and limits, the perception and the scope of work of some Danubian States. If neglected or misinterpreted, this objective circumstance may systematically revive, or prevent us to overcome, numerous endemic disruptions in the region. This fact should be taken account of in our projection of the Danube in the twenty-first century. Understanding national and regional specificities in order to preserve and complement them is, in my estimation, the deeply and irreversibly built-in segment of the new European political sensitivity of which, notwithstanding occasional critical comments and reservations, we can be proud.

Second, investments into the Danube as a waterway and an attractive economic asset must increase. Inland waterways in Europe are still at the fringes of its business interests. This can be overcome by a complex, yet feasible and sustainable, synergy of private business initiatives, government mediation, interdisciplinary approach and a positive public and media campaign. Call it a “new élan of enlightened business for the twenty-first century”. The examples of this “new élan” are already there: *US Steel*, it is nice to say it here in Pittsburgh, bought the largest Serbian steelworks at Smederevo, a town on the Danube some 50 miles downstream from Belgrade. *US Steel* has thus become the biggest foreign investor in Serbia and Montenegro, resuscitated the local harbour and helped my country, economically perspective, yet exhausted by the events of the 1990s, rediscover the Danube as its large asset and development potential.

3. The Danube river basin stretches along the faultline that divides, or connects, for that matter, South-East Europe and the Middle East and that, for its conflict, but also cooperation, potential, is widely believed to be one of the main challenges of the twenty-first century. It is not very likely that our region will remain unaffected whichever tack the developments may take, all the more so as it itself is still insufficiently structured, vulnerable and very volatile. Even though others may have a

say in shaping the tack of the developments in our region in the years to come, ours is to say that the Danube river basin would take on regional or global challenges much more effectively if it succeeds in integrating itself more firmly and functionally into the European matrix. This calls for great many stepping-stones to be climbed, which are too many to be all mentioned here. Therefore, I shall confine myself only to giving a few indications, in the context of final observations.

4. The unified network of European waterways implies an integrated Europe, at least at the level of common economic space. An ever greater number of people elect to think, and I understand them quite well, that the common economic space with an accompanying political infrastructure is perhaps the true measure of things, until the dawn of some brighter distant day. The Danube river basin is a physical, as well as a civilizational transversal in the ascendant, aiming to the North Sea. The transport connection between the Danube delta and Rotterdam has already been established, traversing a succession of most diverse cultures, lifestyles and mores. Some of them shaped, and came to become, the leading trends in what has been known as the European culture and thought, some, especially those in the river's lower course, remained more hermetic for much longer. It is upon all of us, in and out of government, to make sure that one of the mainstays of the future European identity takes root in our consciousness and our Weltanschauung harmoniously, if you want, spasm-free. Rather than spontaneously, this will come about only with more political wisdom, a stronger sense of reality and a daring vision.

In conclusion, let me repeat once again something that has been the leitmotif of this modest contribution of mine: the Danube river basin, vom Schwarzwald bis zum Schwarzen Meer, needs integration to achieve recovery where recovery is needed and affirmation where affirmation is due. This is a pan-European project which must be sparked by the Danubian countries themselves. It is upon them to decide what to do with the blessing that they are bound by Europe's largest navigable river. We in the Danube Commission, whose President I happen to have been since last May and whose main assignment, all along, has been to ensure and promote free navigation on the Danube, are well aware of this blessing. Not least for our and our predecessors' efforts, ships have sailed on the Danube, bar some extreme circumstances, notwithstanding the many ups and downs, regime and border changes, that the region experienced throughout its history. This we have always considered an asset to be preserved for future generations.

To mark the 150th anniversary of its existence, the Danube Commission will hold a Summit Conference in its headquarters in Budapest next year; a Ministerial Meeting, scheduled for next spring in my country, the depository of the Danube

Convention, is expected to adopt a new, revised and updated text of the Convention. These are modest, but important contributions to the structuring of the Danube river basin into a functional whole with its own identity and an important step towards a unified European network of waterways, as part of the campaign of promoting inland water transport, which brought me to your country and this beautiful city.

I thank the organizer of the Conference for having me here and TINA of Austria for making my trip to Pittsburgh possible.

On behalf of the Danube Commission, I greet you cordially and wish you once again every success in your work.

Thank you.

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