RHGT
REVIEW OF HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY AND TOPONOMASTICS
ISSN 1842-8479, E-ISSN 2393-4255
RHGT, Vol. XVIII, Issues 35-36, pp. 55-78

CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE DANUBE REGION: A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE FIELD LITERATURE

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Abstract:
The continuous dynamics of the field literature and the large number of articles make it difficult to analyze the entire body of articles written on a specific topic, such as civic participation and the Danube region. Civic participation and the Danube Region are important research areas but have evolved mainly as two parallel research directions, characterized by minimal conceptual and empirical intersection. This study proposes a systematic review of the specialized literature using PRISMA Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews, and CiteSpace, a software for visualizing and analyzing bibliometric data. The analysis of this study demonstrates and confirms the presence of a clear research gap at the intersection of the two research directions expressed above, namely civic participation at the local level and the macro-regional governance of the Danube, especially in the downstream countries (Lower Danube).

Keywords: civic participation, systematic literature review, PRISMA, CiteSpace, Danube region

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of a larger research study on the civic participation of multicultural communities in the Danube region in tourism and culture, as part of a national research program. Specifically, the aim of this analysis is to provide insights upon both civic participation and participatory governance within the Danube Region (Ágh, 2016), a macro-regional space characterized by complex socio-political transitions and transnational inter-dependencies (Dubois et al. 2009). Civic participation and participatory governance (Brady, Verba, Schlozman, 1995) in the Danube region are presented in an interdisciplinary manner, covering research from different fields,such as social capital theories, governance models and studies from the European Union, as well as representations of spatial analysis methods at the micro level (Van Assche et al., 2015). As a starting point, the bibliographic selection is articulated, encompassing both fundamental studies from the field (Putnam 1993, 2000; Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988;), and specific applications at the European and regional level (Shucksmith 2000; Beugelsdijk 2005; Rodríguez-Pose, Garcilazo 2015; Georgakakis, Rowell 2013; Kauppi 2005; and Westlund, Bolton 2003). This double perspective allows us to highlight the conceptual dimension and concrete mechanisms of civic participation in the European space. The literature on civic participation/engagement (also known as pro-social behaviour) predominantly focuses on three pillars: giving and volunteering; political engagement; and environment-friendly behaviours (Cnaan, Park, 2016).

The academic literature regarding civic participation for the Danube region for can be classified into four interconnected thematic pillars: institutional capacity and cooperation (EUSDR PA 10), environmental governance and trans-boundary waters (ICPDR), socio-economic asymmetries and dependencies on historical routes, and civic education and youth engagement networks (Nagy et al., 2019).However, the scientific literature highlights a significant discrepancy between the theoretical framework of participatory governance promoted by the EU and the empirical realities at the grassroots level, where economic disparities, post-communist institutional legacies and different levels of social trust shape the degree of citizen engagement (Citizen Foresight Europe, 2025; OECD 2025).

To address this analytical gap, the present study formulates the following main research question: what is the current state of knowledge, where do the main contradictions manifest themselves and what gaps persist in the literature dedicated to civic participation in the Danube region? This question will guide the research and examine the link between civic engagement in cultural and tourism activities for Danube region communities. We shall further examine the connection between the specialized literature, the current state of knowledge through taxonomy and clusters of studies on civic participation, in the context of the Danube region, highlighting the persistent gaps.

The topic is particularly relevant, given the importance of civic participation for sustainable development in the region, but also at the EU level, as well as the need to involve citizens as much as possible in decision-making processes and to promote intercultural dialogue. Although this review screened major academic databases

(Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and RePEc) and non-governmental organizational (NGO) reports, data collection was constrained by full-text access restrictions, regional indexing gaps, and the non-standardized reporting formats of grey literature (Khalil et al., 2026).

2. STUDY AREA

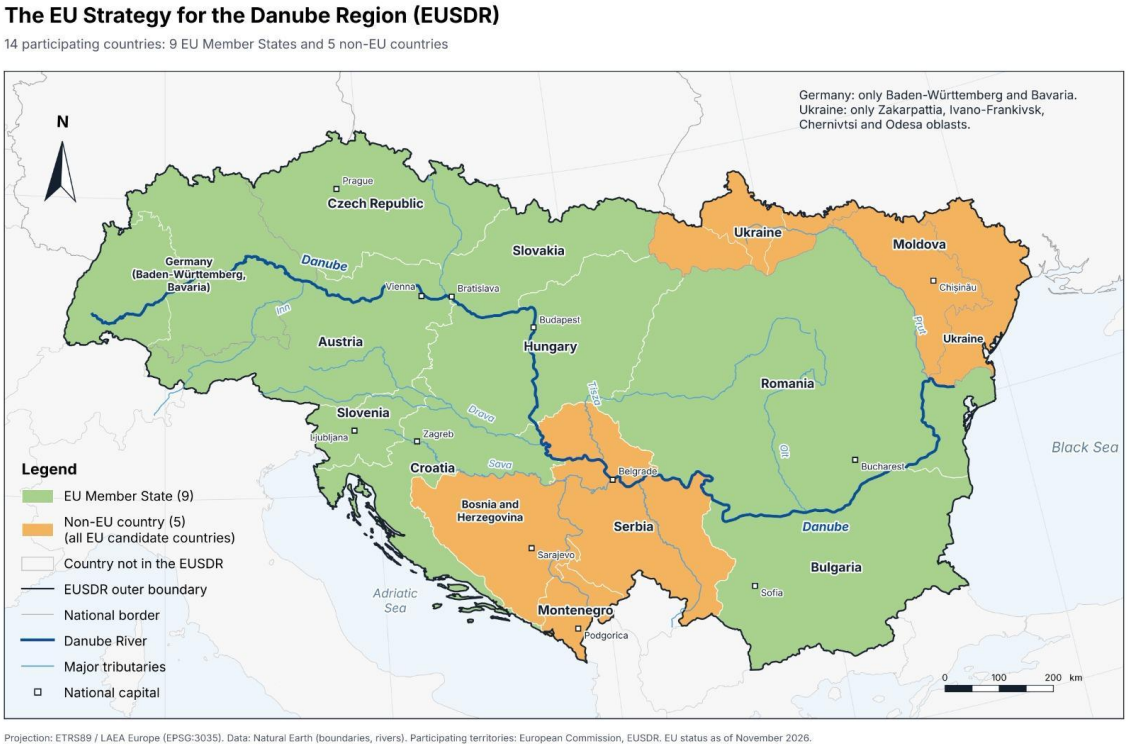
The Danube Region (see Fig. 1) is a geographically, politically, socio-economically and culturally complex functional area of particular importance (Römisch et al.2024), (Schimd et al. 2023). The Danube region lays along the second longest river in Europe, which crosses ten countries and four capitals from its sources in Germany to the Black Sea (Sommerwerk et al. 2009).This territory has become a symbol of European integration(Koller 2010) due toits rich natural heritage and a pronounced ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity (Padło et al. 2021), (Creţan, 2006). The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) was officially adopted in April 2011 and is the EU's second macro-regional strategy (Gál, Lux, Illés, 2013)after the Baltic Sea Region Strategy from 2009.Through the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSD) and the Action Plan 2021-2027, the institutional framework brings together 14 states (Cuyvers, 2017), eight EU Member States and six non-member countries (Lannon, Van Elsuwege, 2004)and a total population of over 100 million inhabitants, with the aim of stimulating socio-economic, cultural and environmental development (Danube Strategy Action Plan 2021-2027).

Even though the region has strategic resources, (Fassmann et al. 2018; Light et al. 2025) it faces multiple challenges and transformations(Busek, Gjoreska 2010), in terms of the social, political, and economic spheres. (Popescu et al. 2021). All these challenges are a reality for the countries along the river, the population on the banks of the Danube, and for the European Union, which underlines the need for unified efforts at European level. At the same time, it offers a multi-layered perspective on the principle of "unity in diversity" for the territory(Akaliyski 2019; Cheneval, Ferrín 2018; Leruth, et al. 2022; Salovaara-Moring, 2009).

Within this research, the study area was clearly delimited, but the specialized bibliographical review included relevant contributions on the subject of interest from several complementary perspectives: studies targeting the macro-regional strategy or at least one of the countries in the region, analyses, reports, studies, related legislation, legal documents dedicated to European Union policies and research dealing with civic participation at a general level.For a better visualization of the study area, we made a cartographic representationusing geographic information systems (GIS).As we can see, we have defined the macro-regional space of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSD). It brings together fourteen participating states, from which nineare European Union member states and five non-EU states, but have the status of candidate countries for accession in EU. Ukraine has also been included, with the regions of Transcarpathia, Ivano-Frankovsk, Chernovtsy and Odessa.

From a geographical perspective, the outline of the macro-region follows the Danube River basin and its main tributaries and extends between the Adriatic Sea and the Black Sea. The map we created used the ETRS89 / LAEA Europe (EPSG:3035) cartographic projection and is rendered at a graphic scale of 0–200 km.

Fig.1 Danube region and the EU Strategy (EUSDR)



Source: European Commission (EUSDR) and Natural Earth data (EU status as of November 2026).

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of a larger research study on the civic participation of multicultural communities in the Danube region in tourism and culture, as part of a national research program. The National Research Program (Nucleu Program) aims to identify good practices at the European level and map relevant actors in the fields of culture and tourism that support multicultural communities across the Danube Region (Rădoi 2026). Its outcomes aim to identify and establish a knowledge base and a collaborative framework that foster sustainable civic participatory systems (Musteață, Lixăndroiu 2024), civic participation and cross-border cooperation (Rădoi, Lixăndroiu, 2026).

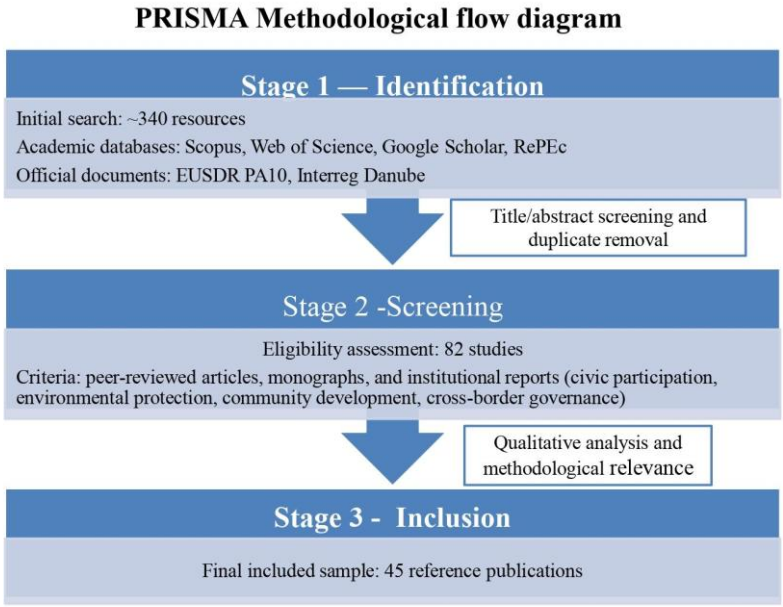
The current study is based on two research directions. The first direction is based on a theoretical argumentation derived from multiple sources of qualitative data to ensure a dual analysis: a concise review of the relevant literature, focused on civic participation and the Danube Region. The second direction is based on an applied framework that combines the PRISMA protocol (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) with a bibliometric analysis performed in Cite Space. Our bibliographic database was organized and compiled from two main categories of sources: established academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and RePEc) and official public policy documents, including EUSDR PA10 reports and Interreg Danube programme. We conducted systematically a selection of specialized literature following the PRISMA methodological flow structured in three successive stages: identification, screening and inclusion. Furthermore, weapplied explicit eligibility and exclusion criteria based on pre-established parameters to evaluate

the publications. The results structure the field on four thematic pillars, highlighting the operational gap between European policies (top-down) and community involvement at the local level (bottom-up approach).

4. PRISMA (PREFEREED REPORTING ITEMS FOR SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS AND META –ANALYSES

This study integrated the PRISMA guidelines to ensure standardized and transparent methodological reporting of the objectives, procedures, and results of the systematic review. PRISMA is an evidence-based framework designed specifically to help authors comprehensively document the reasoning, selection procedures, and findings of systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021).

Figure2. PRISMA Methodological flow diagram



Source:Processed by the authors https://www.prisma-statement.org/prisma-2020

In the first stage of identifying specialized literature, we collected 340 resources from established academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and RePEc), complemented by official documents relevant to the Danube area (EUSDR PA10 and Interreg Danube). In this first stage, in order to systematically identify relevant literature, queries were executed using combinations of keywords in Romanian and English, structured around the following Boolean (Aliyu, 2017) search string: Search criteria: Combinations of Romanian and English terms: ("civic participation" OR "civil society" OR "participatory governance") AND ("Danube Region" OR "EUSDR" OR "Danube basin").

• Inclusion criteria: Peer-reviewed articles, monographs and institutional reports focused on civic participation, environmental protection, community development or cross-border governance in the region. [Initial Search:340 resources] .

Subsequently, in the second stage, after filtering the records based on title and abstract and eliminating duplicates, weretained 82 studies for eligibility assessment. This screening stage aimed to include peer-reviewed articles, analyses and institutional reports that address topics such as civic participation, environmental protection, community development, and cross-border governance. Filtering by title/abstract and duplication) [Eligibility Assessment: 82 studies]

Finally, in the third stage, we carried outa qualitative analysis and thus a final batch of 45 reference publications was established. Another important step was actually that of exclusions: Identification (n=340n = 340n=340) →\rightarrow→ Duplicates eliminated (n=Xn = Xn=X) →\rightarrow→ Title/abstract screening (n=Yn = Yn=Y excluded) →\rightarrow→ Full text evaluation (n=82n = 82n=82), of which n=56n = 56n=56 excluded (for reasons: lack of regional focus, unclear methodology, etc.) →\rightarrow→ Final batch (n=45n = 45n=45).

To maintain the level of standardization, weanalysedpublications and evaluated them according to predefined inclusion and exclusion parameters.

Table 1. predefined inclusion and exclusion parameters

Parameter	**Inclusion Criteria**	**Exclusion Criteria**
Geographic Scope	Focus on one or more of the 14 Danube macro-region countries (EU and non-EU).	Studies focusing exclusively on non-Danubian European contexts without regional comparative relevance.
Thematic Focus	Empirical or theoretical analysis of civic participation, CSO involvement, multi-level governance, or community-led cultural/tourism development.	Exclusively bio-physical, technical, hydrological, or eco-toxicological research lacking human/institutional dimensions.
Methodological Rigor	Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic book chapters, and formal policy evaluation reports from accredited institutions.	Non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces, non-academic blogs, commercial reports, and incomplete conference abstracts.
Language &	English and Romanian language publications published between	Studies published prior to 2004 or published in un-indexed languages

Parameter	**Inclusion Criteria**	**Exclusion Criteria**
Period	2004 and 2026.	without English abstracts.

Source:Processed by the authors https://www.prisma-statement.org/prisma-2020

This hybrid approach combines the rigor of data selection (PRISMA) with the quantitative and visual mapping of the evolution of a scientific field (CiteSpace), eliminating the subjectivity of a classic narrative literature review.

5. CITESPACE

CiteSpace is a software tool, used for visualizing and analysing patterns, trends, and turning points in scientific literature (Chen, 2006). We used CiteSpace analysis softwarefor the bibliometric analysis of all papers, and the results of the analysis of literature clustering, scientific research collaboration, co-citations, and so on were visually displayed (Su et al., 2019). Following the PRISMA selection protocol, the final validated corpus (N = 45 reference publications) was imported into CiteSpace to map the intellectual structure and temporal dynamics of the research field (Chen, 2006). Consistent with established scientometric workflows (Su et al., 2019), the bibliometric analysis was structured around four complementary analytical procedures:

• document and author co-citation analysis identifies fundamental works that are frequently cited together and groups the literature into thematic clusters (showing on which theoretical pillars the field was built);

• keyword co-occurrence and clustering extract dominant themes and research sub-directions. The validity of the network is reported through two essential structural indicators: Modularity Q (Q > 0.3 confirms a significant cluster structure) and Mean Silhouette S (S > 0.7 indicates a high homogeneity and reliability of the clusters).

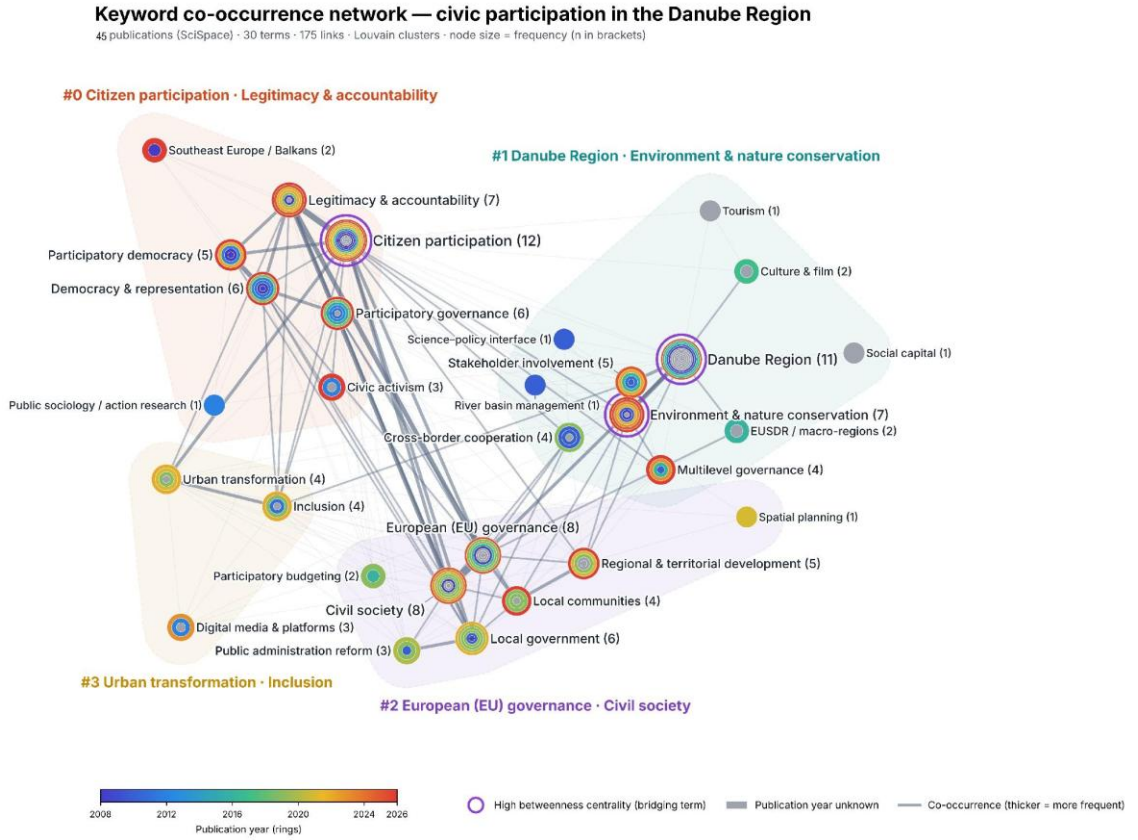
• citation burst detection for keywords or articles that have registered a sudden explosion of citations in a certain period, indicating turning points and emerging frontiers (research fronts) (Li et al., 2026);

• betweenness centrality and timeline view, which highlights "bridge" articles (those with centrality \age 0.1, visually marked with a purple ring in CiteSpace) that connect different theoretical currents and show the chronological evolution of topics.

6. RESULTS

The visualization of the bibliometric analysis performed through the CiteSpace software allowed us mapping the configuration of specialized literature found at the intersection of civic participation and the Danube Region.

Fig. 3 CiteSpace vizualisation of specialized literature at the intersection of civic participation and the Danube Region



*Source:*Data taken from CiteSpace processed by authors

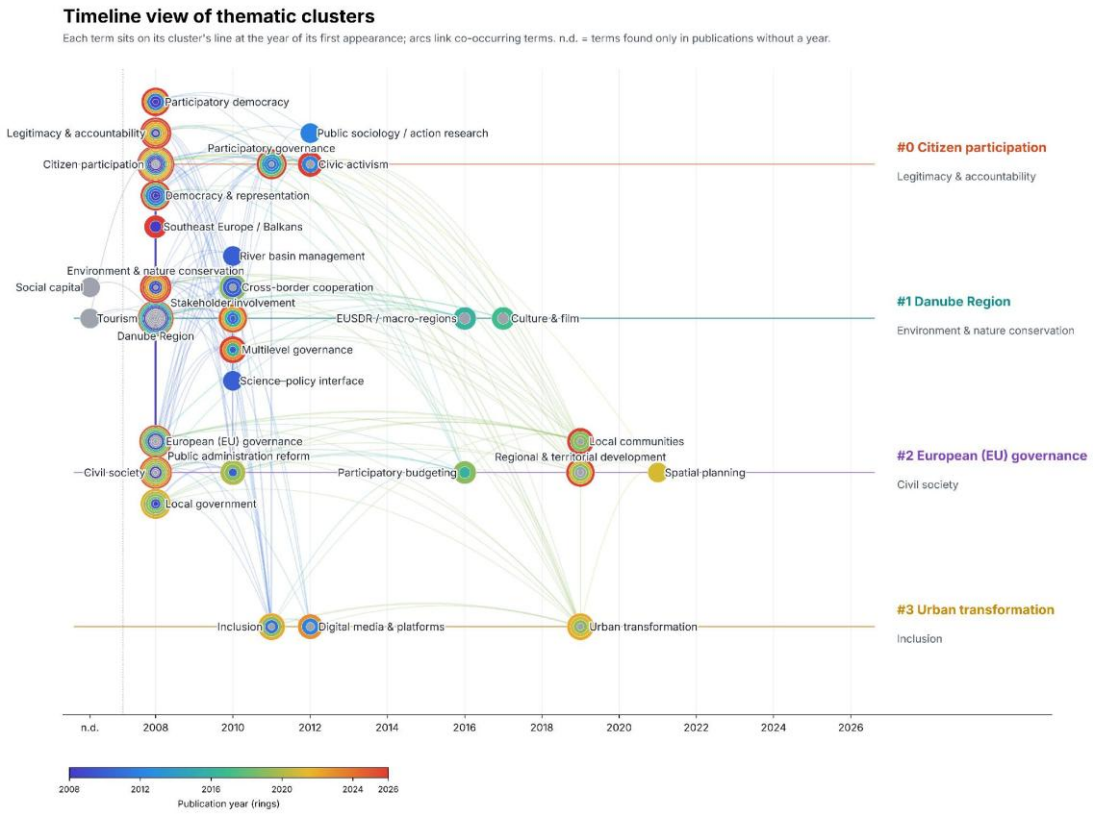
We dividedthe literature first into two separate groups, than continued with another division into two groups. One group is about participation and democracy, the other about the Danube as a basin and region. “Citizen participation” (12 publications) and “Danube Region” (11) appear together in a single publication (Musteață-Pavel).

As a result, there were some specific elements of bibliometric data analysis and scientific literature we could view:

- a node in CiteSpace represents a unit of analysis in the scientific literature viewed in the network (e.g., keyword, author, institution, country, or cited reference). Its size is proportional to the number of publications in which it appears or the number of citations received (the value displayed in parentheses).
- the rings in the node are the publications, ordered by year. The center is the oldest (blue), the edge is the most recent (red). Gray means unknown year.
- the line connects two terms that appear in the same publication. The thick line means that they appear together more than once.
- the coloured area is a cluster. Its label (#0–#3) gives the two most frequent terms.
- the purple ring marks the bridging terms, with betweenness centrality above 0.05. Mostof the short paths between the other terms pass through them.

The network shows two research directions that evolve separately. One studies civic participation and democracy, the other the Danube as a basin and macroregion. The two central terms appear together in a single article. This is the gap that my thesis addresses.

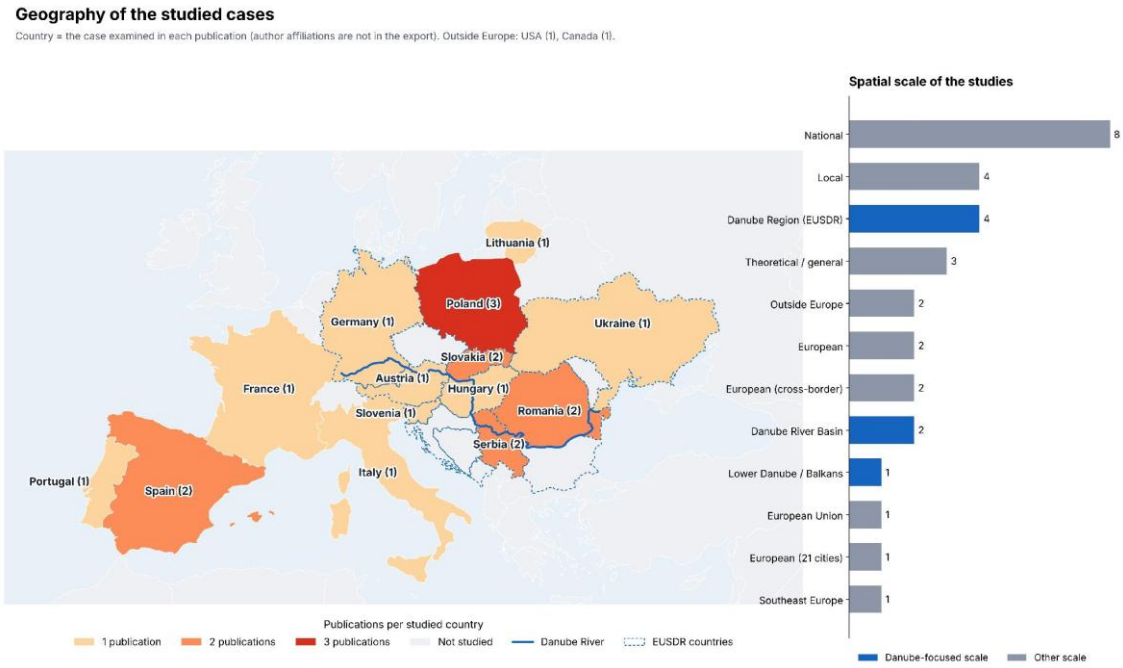
Fig. 4 CiteSpace vizualisation of timeline view



Source: Data taken from CiteSpace processed by authors

The timeline from above shows when each theme appears. The discourse on the Danube is centred around basin governance and the EUSDR and stabilized after 2017. The Danube cluster no longer receivesterms after 2017. From 2019–2021 there were addedterms in the clusters on local government and cities. The new themes of participation are local and urban and do not reach the Danube cluster. This is where research linking local participation to the Danube space can intervene.

Fig. 5. CiteSpace vizualisation of geography case studies



Source: Data taken from CiteSpace processed by authors

We have noted the title and abstract of each publication and the country of the case study. We observed a publication can have several countries. Thus, Ulrich's study compares four cross-border regions and adds 7 countries on its own: Germany, Austria, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, and Poland. Publications on the whole basin or on the EUSDR do not have a single country, they appear only in the scale chart. Downstream countries are almost absent, only 4 publications study a specific country in relation to the Danube. Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and Serbia. Bulgaria, Croatia, the Republic of Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and the Czech Republic do not appear at all. The literature on the Danube either works on a large scale (the whole basin, the whole strategy) or does not work at all with participation. The case studies on participation in the sample come mainly from Poland and Spain, from outside the Danube Region.

Fig. 6. CiteSpace vizualisation of geographycase studies

Publications, first authors and sources over time

First author	Year	Title	Source	Cit.	Relevance	2008 — 2026
Anduiza E. et al. (+3)	2008	The Electoral Impact of Direct-Democratic Practices	Int. Journal of Urban and Regional...	0	40/100	
Bouilineau E.	2008	Le Danube dans les Balkans : introduction au dossier	Balkanologie	0	40/100	
Tomšič M. et al. (+1)	2008	Governance and Civil Society at the EU Level	Managing Global Transitions	0	40/100	
Schaap L. et al. (+3)	2010	Innovations in Sub-National Government in Europe	n/a	0	40/100	
Sommerwerk N. et al. (+9)	2010	Managing the world's most international river: the Danube River Basin	Marine and Freshwater Research	83	80/100	
Marochi B.I.	2011	Political inclusion and representative claim-making in participatory governan...	n/a	0	40/100	
Fuentes-Bautista M.	2012	Mapping "diversity of participation" in networked media environments	SSRN	0	40/100	
Nez H.	2012	For a public sociology on participatory democracy: Reflexive feedback on a re...	Revista Internacional de Sociologia	0	40/100	
Lee C.W.	2015	Participatory Practices in Organizations	Sociology Compass	0	40/100	
Jazbinšek S.	2016	Citizen participation in public budgeting : the case of participatory budgeti...	Dissertation	0	40/100	
Sielker F.	2016	New approaches in European governance? Perspectives of stakeholders in the Da...	Regional Studies, Regional Science	28	70/100	
Miller M.D.	2017	Bottled Messages for Europe's Future? The Danube in Contemporary Transnationa...	Book chapter	0	40/100	
Boc E.	2019	The Development of Participatory Budgeting Processes in Cluj-Napoca	Transylvanian Review of Administrat...	0	40/100	
Mikula N. et al. (+2)	2019	Leading role of civil society in the community life and cross-border space	Conference proceedings	0	40/100	
Rajca L.	2020	Management reforms in the Polish and Hungarian local government	n/a	0	40/100	
Nadin V. et al. (+3)	2021	Integrated, adaptive and participatory spatial planning: trends across Europe	Regional Studies	145	40/100	
Kiss B. et al. (+5)	2022	Citizen participation in the governance of nature-based solutions	Environmental Policy and Governance	244	40/100	
Madej M. et al. (+1)	2022	Népszavazások és egyéb konzultációs eszközök a helyi döntéshozatali folyamatb...	Pólusok	0	40/100	
Martin M.R.	2023	An Investigation of Social Media Use for Environmental Norm Development: An E...	n/a	0	40/100	
Valentinavičius V. et al. (+2)	2025	Democratic Resilience in Lithuania and the EU: Examining the Role of Civil So...	Viešoji politika ir administravimas	0	40/100	
Zinke A. et al. (+1)	2025	The bottom-up approach: Stakeholder participation to strengthen nature conser...	n/a	0	100/100	
Feoh P.N.S. et al. (+3)	2026	Participatory democratic innovations in southeast europe: how to engage in fi...	Critical Policy Studies	0	40/100	
Hrivnák M. et al. (+3)	2026	Community Formation and Grassroots Governance Under Institutional Voids: Evid...	Advances in the Social Sciences	0	40/100	
Bitušíková A.	n.d.	Civic Activism in the Danube Region: A Case Study from Slovakia	n/a	1	100/100	year unknown
Ilić N.M.	n.d.	SOCIAL CAPITAL NETWORKS IN SERBIA: STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE DANUBE RIVER	n/a	0	40/100	year unknown
Ivanova T.	n.d.	Awareness of Ukrainian communities and enterprises about the problems of the...	Ekonomičnij visnik (UDHTU)	0	70/100	year unknown
Milovanović Rodić D. et al. (...	n.d.	From online platforms to on-ground actions: synergies of digital and analog c...	n/a	1	40/100	year unknown
Musteață-Pavel M.	n.d.	Analysing civic participation in Romania's Danube region's multicultural tour...	n/a	1	100/100	year unknown
Ulrich P.	n.d.	Participatory Governance in the Europe of Cross-Border Regions	n/a	0	40/100	year unknown
Vukanić R.	n.d.	The role of civil society in promoting the potential of the Danube basin in t...	n/a	0	100/100	year unknown
Živković L. et al. (+1)	n.d.	"Attractive Danube"–Improving Capacities for Enhancing Territorial Attractive...	n/a	0	40/100	year unknown

Bar: red/blue segment = publication year (blue = Danube-focused publication). Relevance = SciSpace relevance score. Nez (2012) appeared twice in the export and was merged.

Source: Data taken from CiteSpace processed by authors

Highly cited papers are broad European studies, published in important journals (Environmental Policy and Governance, Regional Studies). The papers closest to our topic are recent or appear in small sources, indexed only in Google Scholar. The lack of a dominant journal shows a fragmented field, without a consolidated core.

7. Discussion

The demonstrated and persistent separation between the two research directions of civic participation and Danube Region is not just a bibliographical truth; it reveals a fundamental structural tension in European macro-regional governance. Taken separately, these bibliometric dimensions clarify why the connection between the literature on civic participation and the Danube region remains under-theorized and under-studied. Therefore, each field of study has developed a technocratic lexicon (stakeholder involvement, management) isolated from newer studies on local participatory budgeting, or social inclusion. Analyzed together, these bibliometric dimensions clarify that the intersection between civic participation and the Danube region is very close and that certain studies on the Lower Danube area, as an example, can be combined for better research designs. This gap is exacerbated by highly relevant studies on the Danube region and studies on civic engagement in society, which remain scattered in sources with minimal citation visibility, preventing the formation of a cohesive epistemic community. The future evolution of the two fields involves working

together, so that the gap becomes a new common domain, with the literature dedicated to civic participation focused on the macro-regional governance of the Danube.

8. Conclusion

To sum up, we applied the systematic analysis, carried out according to the PRISMA methodology, complemented by CitiSpace bibliometric mapping where the occurrence of terms, temporal evolution, geographical distribution and impact of citations, on a final corpus of 45 unique publications. The results demonstrate that civic participation and the Danube Region are mainly approached as two parallel research directions, evolving separately, with minimal conceptual and empirical intersection.

Therefore, the analysis of this study demonstrates and confirms the presence of a clear research gap at the intersection of the two research directions expressed above, namely civic participation at the local level and the macro-regional governance of the Danube, especially in the downstream countries (Lower Danube). Covering this deficit requires studies based on multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity and comparative studies through which the mechanisms of civic participation can be adapted, and in full connection with cross-border cooperation and environmental policies in the Danube Region.

Acknowledgement This work was supported by the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization within Nucleu Programme [PN 23-42 01 02, 2023-2026]

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