

ASSESSING CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN CULTURAL AND TOURISM SECTORS IN THE DANUBE REGION

Ilie RĂDOI

National Institute of Research and Development in Tourism, Bucharest, Romania

Email: ilie.radoi@incdt.ro

Cristina Cornelia Florentina LIXĂNDROIU

National Institute of Research and Development in Tourism, Bucharest, Romania

Email: curea@incdt.ro

Abstract: *The ongoing dynamics of unification and the potential threats to cohesion within European states indicate that civic participation is a viable means of promoting unity and mutual understanding among multicultural communities in the Danube Iron Gate region. This paper investigates the role of civic participation in culture and tourism among communities in the Iron Gate area, which surrounds the Danube River and is renowned for its rich natural and cultural heritage. It emphasizes how civic engagement in these sectors plays a crucial role in fostering shared cultural identities, preserving heritage, and boosting local economies. This case study of the Iron Gate region, viewed from both geographical and historical perspectives, examines how local communities and stakeholders actively participate in shaping tourism strategies and cultural initiatives, thereby overcoming historical and geographical boundaries. The article offers a qualitative analysis of the opportunities and challenges of civic involvement arising from cross-border cooperation in this context, highlighting how cultural collaboration transforms borders from barriers into bridges, strengthening ties between communities in the Danube Gorge. The concepts of basin de vie and the Anabel method are used to identify civic participation, while territorial approaches are applied to measure civic engagement in culture and tourism in the Iron Gate region. In conclusion, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of civic participation in the development of sustainable tourism in the Iron Gate area. It underscores the importance of ensuring that all citizens, regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, or religious backgrounds, have a voice in shaping the future of their cultural heritage and tourism strategies.*

Keywords: *civic participation, culture, tourism, communities, Danube region*

1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper is part of a broader research study on civic participation of multicultural communities from the Danube region in tourism and culture, conducted by the authors between 2024 and 2025 as part of a national research programme. The National Research programme (Program Nucleu in Romanian) aims to identify good practices at the European level and map relevant actors in the fields of culture and tourism supporting multicultural communities in the Danube region. The programme's outcomes are intended to provide a knowledge base and a framework for collaboration to support sustainable civic participation and cross-border cooperation in the region.

We begin this study with the central question: *which territorial approaches can be used to identify civic participation in culture and tourism in the Iron Gate Danube Region?* This question will guide the research and examine the link between civic engagement in cultural and tourism activities in these communities. Geographically speaking, (see Figure 1) the Danube region is a functional area (Römisch et al., 2024), and is centred around the Danube, the second-longest river in Europe after Volga, playing a significant role in the region's history, culture, and economy (Schimd et al. 2023). The river Danube crosses ten countries on its way to the Black Sea, along the main course: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Moldova (Sommerwerk et al., 2009), and four capitals. As a result, we can say that the Danube is characterised by its rich natural and cultural heritage, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity (Creţan, 2006; Văran and Creţan, 2018). We refer to the area surrounding the Danube River and the countries it flows through, in Central and South-Eastern Europe (Padło et al. 2021). From a political perspective, at the European Union level, the Danube region is the third EU macro-region and perhaps the most complex at this level. (Gál, Lux and Illés, 2013).

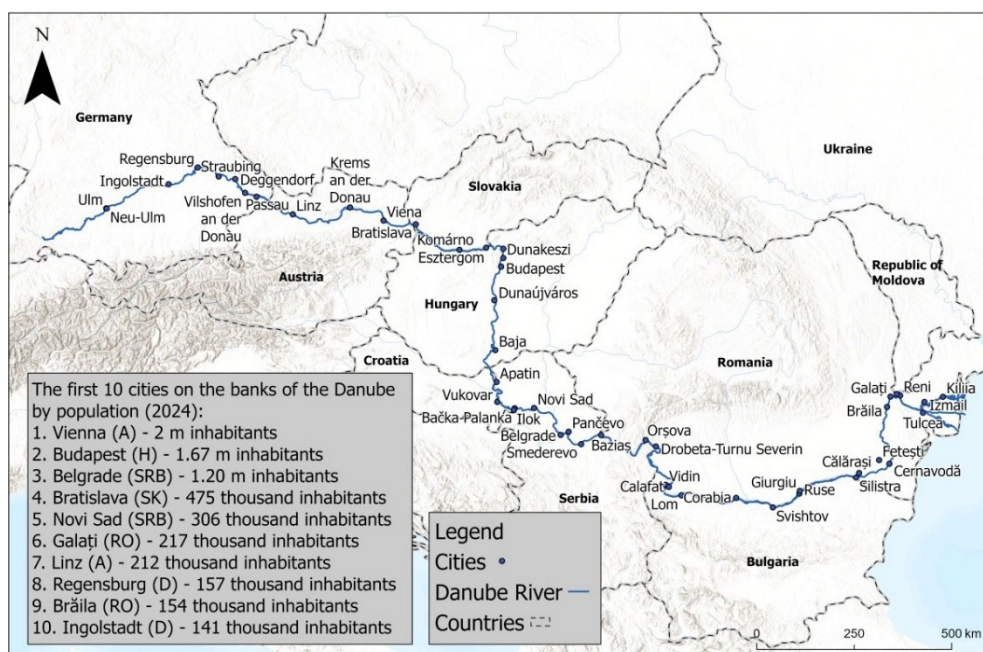


Figure 1. Human settlements along the Danube River

Source: processed by authors

The Danube has acquired a new role as a symbol of Europe (Koller, 2010), not only connecting the countries along its course, but also promoting wider European integration. The "EU Strategy for the Danube Region" (EUSDR) aims to strengthen the links between the 14 countries along the river, including 8 EU Member States (Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania) and six non-member states (Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Ukraine and Moldova). Population in the Danube Region reaches more than 100 million people. This strategy creates a macro-region intended to improve social, economic, environmental and cultural development in the area. The Danube Strategy Action Plan outlines projects that should contribute to the increase of the quality of life (Danube Strategy Action Plan 2021-2027). Despite all assets, the Danube region faces various ongoing challenges (Fassmann et al. 2018; Light et al. 2025) and transformations (Busek and Gjoreska, 2010) in the social, political, and economic spheres (Popescu et al., 2021). All of these data supports unification efforts at European level and, in the same time, gives different interpretations of unity through diversity, offering a multi-layered approach to this heritage (Pfoser, 2017).

2. STUDY AREA

Our study area is at the intersection of the lines of action of several strategies: European, transnational, Euro regional, national, regional and local. We must consider in the analysis of the projects, all these strategies and financing funds. To better understand the phenomenon, we started from the macro level (the European strategies and programs established by the European Commission). Within the broader Danube macro-region, we selected the Iron Gate Danube Region as a case study, focusing on two Romanian counties: Mehedinți and Caraș-Severin, and in Serbia the districts of Bor and Brancicevsky. These counties were selected due to their strategic and representative characteristics. First of all, as border territories along the Danube, the selected counties are directly shaped by cross-border dynamics between Romania and Serbia (Grigorescu, et al., 2016), making them highly relevant for mapping of transnational civic engagement. Secondly, the area has different ethnic communities, including: Romanians, Serbs, Czechs, and other minority groups, illustrating the multicultural character of the broader Danube region.

Over the centuries, (see Figure 2) these communities have been connected through the river's vast hydrographic system, making the Danube a central element in regional interconnection. Most of the Danube's course is in our study area in Romania, representing 29% of its basin. In Serbia, the river covers 10.2% of the territory (International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River, 2024). Regarding environmental protection, the gorge is divided between two major nationally designated protected areas: in Romania, the Iron Gates Natural Park and in Serbia, Đerdap National Park. In the year 2020, UNESCO acknowledged the area as a UNESCO Global Geopark, emphasizing its international ecological and geological importance (UNESCO, 2020).



Figure 2. Danube Iron Gate Gorge
Source: processed by authors

3. METHODOLOGY

The present paper is based on two directions of research. The first direction is more theoretical argumentation, starting from multiple sources of qualitative data to ensure double check analysis: Literature review, Document analysis and Project reports. The second direction is an applied framework, an empirical analysis. We start from qualitative data and apply the Anabell method - a *bassin de vie* approach, to understand spatial and social dynamics in the Danube Iron Gate region. The first methodological direction is structured in three phases, which will be explained very shortly as follows:

- For the literature review, we are starting from Putnam's theory (2000), a fundamental theory about civic participation, community development and cultural integration, and continue with civic engagement research (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). From this theoretical perspective applied on our research area results a systematic framework for understanding patterns of participation. We can comprehend the dynamics of civic involvement and cultural cooperation in the Danube Iron Gate region.
- For policy documents, we are focusing on official papers about participatory governance from different project reports, publications and implementation plans and EU Danube Strategy. In this direction according to Bomberg (2001) and Grote and Gbikpi (2002), participatory governance requires a democratic institutional framework. In the framework of the EU Danube Strategy Danube Region (EUSDR 2022), civil society participation is a key driver for resilient territorial development across the Danube Region. They build the strategy on two pillars: the first one to understand the role that civil society plays in diverse communities (Ciocnitu Stoiconi, 2024) and secondly, to identify effective ways to support and strengthen this participation (Fischer, 2011). In the European

Union, the Decision No 445/2014/EU of the European Parliament and Council supports Cultural Governance and participatory governance of cultural heritage. For this reason, the official acknowledgement was integrated through European Parliament resolution:” towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe”.

- in the third phase, we collected data through reports from the Phase II of the project ADATUROS funded in 2024. We have material data that covers the research area and a list of NGOs involved in civic participation in the Iron Gate Danube region.

4. PHYSICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The Iron Gates Gorge is a section of the Danube River, part of the natural border between Serbia and Romania. In a broader sense, it designates a 134 km stretch of the river, while in a narrower sense, it refers specifically to the hydroelectric dam near the Romanian city of Orșova. Geographically, the Gorges lies between Romania (North) and Serbia (South). From a geomorphological perspective, The Danube crosses the Carpathians, separating the Banat Mountains from the Serbian Carpathians. The Hungarian name Vaskapu (“Iron Gates”) is used alongside the Romanian designation to describe the entire chain of gorges. In Romanian language, the final section is also known as Clisura Dunării, while in Serbia the Gorges are referred to as Đerdap.

The geographical variety shaped by the Danube is given by its cultural, economic and political diversity in the countries through which it flows. Connecting Eastern Europe and Western Europe, the joint management of the river's resources symbolizes the potential for cooperation between different countries, from a social, political and economic point of view (Rich et al., 1997). To solve the problems related to the development of the Danube and the protection of the environment, it is required the involvement of national and local actors, laws and administrative procedures, national priorities and very different resources (Văran and Crețan, 2018; Crețan et al., 2023). The countries on the upper reaches of the river (Western Germany and Austria) stand in contrast to those on the lower reaches (Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine), both in terms of industrial development and awareness regarding environmental problems.

5. CIVIC PARTICIPATION

This paper explores how active engagement of local communities and stakeholders in tourism and cultural can play a crucial role in promoting shared cultural identities, preserving heritage, and boosting local economies. The study analyses the actual civic participatory systems (Musteață and Lixandroi, 2024) and their effect on the development and valorisation of cultural heritage through tourism. This case study of Iron Gate Danube region area examines how local communities and stakeholders in the Danube region actively participate in shaping tourism strategies and cultural initiatives, overcoming historical and geographical boundaries. Therefore, studies about civic participation in policy-making and sustainable development (Römisch et al., 2024) in multicultural communities (Alexander, 2001), are essential to understand the key role of civic participation. The multiple studies about participatory and governance of Stephan, Marshall and McGinnis (2019), Bonini et al. (2015), and Foster (2011) hold a

significant role in our research. In the Iron Gate Danube Gorge region involving citizens in decision-making processes for sustainable development (Ágh, 2016) contributes to the long-term regional development (Obradović et al., 2025) and shaping a coherent vision for the cultural and tourism sector (Borseková and Vitálišová, 2024). Furthermore, engaging citizens in the decision-making process ensures that the development of tourism and the valorisation of cultural heritage are not driven solely by external or top-down influences, but are instead shaped by the local communities who are the stewards of that heritage (Grcheva and Vehbi, 2021). This can lead to more sustainable and locally driven tourism strategies that respect the environment and foster long-term community benefits (Krittayaruangroj et al., 2023).

6. BASSIN DE VIE

Starting from the concept of geographical space, in an evolutionary perspective, we arrive at the necessity of its restructuring. The need to improve the quality of human life is a result of the requirements to restructure the space, to organize it in such a way that it can ensure the social, economic, and political conditions on which the existence of mankind depends, its ways of development. The perception of space is subjective. An example would be the way the Danube river has been perceived over time by the inhabitants of both banks. Depending on our perception, the river can be seen as a barrier and therefore an impediment to cross-border cooperation, or as a bridge, a real natural resource. At this stage of our article, it is necessary to mention Bratosin (2007)'s study on the symbolic construction of territory (concertation and contracting), which emphasize the key role of community involvement in regional development. These concertation and contracting are given by the interaction through legal, social, and cultural mechanisms of the actors in a community. For our study area we chose a specific method and framework that effectively supports understanding population distribution and the relationship between territory and their daily activity. The concept of basin de vie provides a clear method for analysing, how everyday life patterns shape and reinforce territorial cohesion (Salerno, Coletti and Tobias, 2024; Rădoi, 2020; Rădoi, 2017; Săgeată and Crețan, 2025). Basin de vie is a spatial organization model of the territory, related to the elements favourable to urbanization. The term basin de vie comes from France. It is an expression used by the National Institute of Statistical and Economic Studies of France (INSEE) which designates a territorial division, an area called "basin de vie or life basin", in other words, a relatively small area, in which the individual can have access to technical and urban facilities for the daily life and a job. This division allows a better understanding of the structure and distribution of the population between rural and urban areas. The technical and urban facilities that must be met to define a basin de vie have been divided into six areas:

- the existence of administrative services, in particular financial administration, town hall, bank, post office, police, employment office and public notary;
- commerce (minimarket, supermarket, various non-food stores);
- medical services (pharmacy, veterinarian, dentist, medical office, first aid point, hospital);
- education (nursery, high school);
- sports, culture, leisure (sports halls, cinema, cultural activities);
- transport (local public transport, taxi).

The territorial organization through basin de vie type designates both elements of economic geography (workplace, services) and elements of social geography (population, population structure). In mainland France, in addition to the territory of the major cities, the territory has been divided into 1,745 zones and life basins. Since 1975, these areas have seen the strongest population growth. To create life pools, INSEE has proposed two basic elements: accessibility in the territory and the presence of the technical and administrative base in the territory. In France, in 2003, the notion of bassin de vie was purely statistical, and the proposed definition delimited a predominantly rural space or one without too many influences from urban poles. Over time, other definitions have been proposed, such as a territorial cut-off around cities, peri-urban space. The newly created situation was not the same everywhere; the space around large cities had other functions and characteristics. Mobility designated the territory of proximity or without too much influence from the urban poles. In 2010, a new definition designated a bassin de vie as the territorial cut-off connected to large polarizing cities, but dependent, polarized by a small urban centre, around which villages and communes polarized.

Finally, we analyse the field data, this direction is more applied research. This study focuses on mapping civic participation, and is using the method bassin de vie, within the field of cultural and tourism development in the Danube Gorge–Iron Gate region, specifically targeting its multicultural communities. This implies a research method that integrates data collection, analysis, and visualization of the map. To integrate basin de vie into the territory, in France, researchers have developed an analysis method called MIRABEL/ANABEL, which emerged as a solution to the process of analysing a basin de vie. The analysis studied a person's daily travel between work and home, which led to a demarcation of the basin regarding employment, but also of the place where the person carried out his/her daily activities, in relation to his/her home. To apply the ANABEL method, the localities are organized according to the Figure 3:

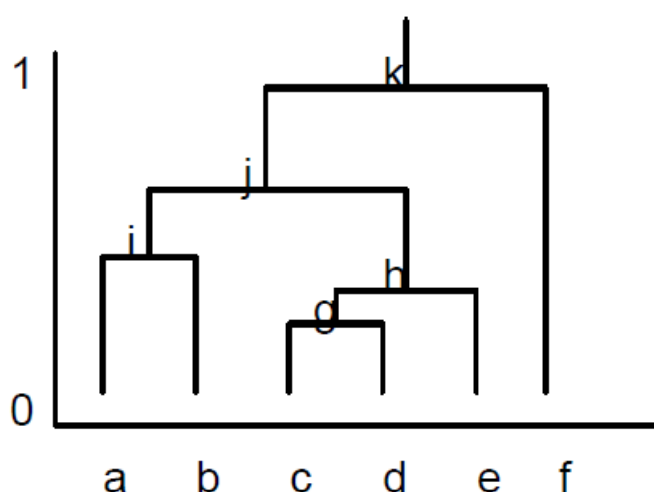


Figure 3. ANABEL Method
Souce: INSEE Franța, 2010

The closest localities are those from the boxes c, d, and the most distant those from box k. This organisation establishes a connection between the localities. Each commune is identified with a letter on the X, Y axes:

- the place of residence is recorded on the X axis;
- the locality where the person works/studies, on the Y axis;
- between the two axes we obtain the active population in the locality of residence or the locality where the person works or studies.

For our study, instead of work we consider where the NGO's address is located and what is it polarizing through its activities. We mark with a D the distance and with A the total number of the NGO's in each town.

7. ANABEL METHOD APPLIED IN IRON GATE DANUBE GORGE AREA

The MIRABEL/ANABEL method is used for researching a bassin de vie in our study, referring to the polarizing area of the localities in the Danube Gorge. The bassin de vie in our study area overlaps the polarizing force of urban centres, exerted against communes and villages. Here we are talking about a merger of the basic administrative units with the hydrographic ones, and finally we arrive, for our study, at localities and the flows between them, in a space defined, possibly, also by the polarizing axis of a hydrographic basin. The studied area is composed of the life basin of the Danube Gorge Iron Gate, which stretches both on the Romanian side and in Serbia. To better understand the concept, we resort to the urban hierarchy which, through the rank-height ratio, highlights the size ratios between cities and the particularities given by the historical evolution. Creating this map, it was used a database consisting of digitized points with attributes that are the number of NGOs from each living area; the other shapes were of the Danube river and the borders for Romania and Serbia. Furthermore, by using ArcGIS Pro, the analysis was made with the help of *Create Feature*, *Calculate Feature* and *Buffer* tools. For creating the Bassin de vie we used the formula: $D = k \cdot \sqrt{A}$. The formula is used in land research, where the main idea is to have a scaling pattern – *homothetic scaling*, along with radial analysis on how European cities use land (Lemoy and Caruso, 2021): where D is the distance, k is a variable depending on the type of administrative function of the living area, thus those values are 1 km for a village; 2 km for commune; 3 km for a city and 4 km for a municipality. The variable A is the total number of the NGOs from each town. Following this equation resulted the following Bassin de vie (see Figure 3). On the map we can see that the bassin de vie around Moldova Nouă, Orşova in Romania, and Golubac, Veliko Gradište in Serbia is much larger than other settlements. This is due to the presence of a larger number of people in these settlements. At the same time in Eibenthal Romania and Tekija from Serbia basin de vie is considering smaller, with just one example of stakeholders in these settlements. After determining the radius, the study continued with creating buffers on the map, resulting in circular areas that represent the total area of each town to: Bassin de vie with buffer radius (Table 1). These buffers form the potential territorial influence of each settlement in the research area, based according to the number of NGOs. Even when some circles extend across the national border, the effective radius does not apply in the neighboring country because of differences in political and administrative systems, as the Serbia is not an EU member state.

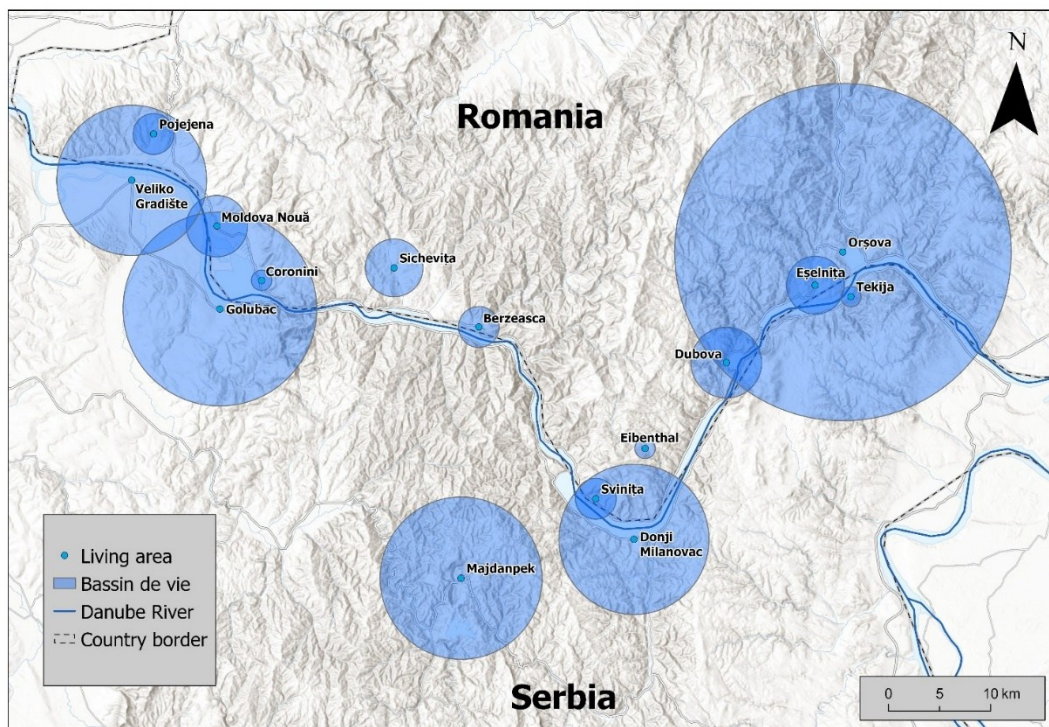


Figure 3. Bassin de vie in research in Iron Gate Danube Gorge
Source: processed by authors

Table 1. Bassin de vie with buffer radius

Name	Total ONGs	Administrative type	Buffer radius (km)
Dubova	3	2	3.4
Moldova Nouă	1	3	3
Berzeasca	1	2	2
Svinița	1	2	2
Pojejena	1	2	2
Sichevița	2	2	2.8
Eibenthal	1	1	1
Eșelnița	2	2	2.8
Orșova	17	4	16.4
Coronini	1	1	1
Donji Milanovac	6	3	7.3
Golubac	10	3	9.4
Majdanpek	7	3	7.9
Veliko Gradište	6	3	7.3
Tekija	1	1	1

Source: processed by authors

8. CONCLUSIONS

Mapping of civic participation in the Iron Gate Gorge area using a method from the spatial land and a model from statistical field reveals the spatial patterns. The results indicate that the clusters of association are not randomly distributed but connected to the local context and resources from rural area to urban spaces. The spatial concentration reflects the central role of the river. Overall, these patterns reveal that geographical assets represent a strategic engagement to drive the community development. At the same time, the findings underscore the need to ensure inclusive participation in decision-making processes, enabling all citizens—regardless of ethnic, linguistic, or religious backgrounds—to shape the future of their cultural landscape.

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