# SIGNIFICANCE AND TREATMENT OF CURRENT WORLD TRENDS



Belgrade 2023

## SIGNIFICANCE AND TREATMENT OF CURRENT WORLD TRENDS

Thematic Compendium

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#### THE ROLE OF SECURITY IN DANUBE CRUISE TOURISM

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#### Abstract

Cruise tourism has witnessed dynamic development over the last twenty years, which was only disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This trend can be contrasted with the observed decline in freight transport, which has mitigated the low rate of waterway utilisation. The Danube-Main-Rhine is the most important route for European river cruise tourism. The volume of traffic in Danube cruise tourism doubled between 2002 and 2011, and has been growing steadily ever since. In 2020, the pandemic triggered a 90 % drop in passenger traffic, due mostly to the overwhelming share of guests belonging to the senior citizen category and many overseas passengers traveling to Europe by air.

The steadily improving security situation in the region and European integration have been key to the development of Danube navigation. The changes introduced from 2019 and their implications underline the significance of the freedom of entry and movement between countries for the sector. The purpose of the paper is to substantiate this claim.

Keywords: Danube, Danube navigation, borders, security, river cruise tourism

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#### Introduction

The Danube River was under-utilised as an international waterway for a long period of time. This is mainly a consequence of the geographical attributes of the river. The uneven regime of the Danube frequently produces low water levels during late summer and autumn. Another hindrance is the low availability of navigable tributaries, with only the Drava, Sava and Tisza having a size and flow enabling navigation (Hardi 2012, p. 283). The Danube needs to overcome significant topographical impediments, which renders navigation and waterway development problematic. In addition, the river flows into the Black Sea, which is a closed (inland) sea.

An additional obstacle is more political by nature, as the river would often meander along the borders of various cultures and empires, and development was frequently interrupted by devastating wars. During the explosion of Atlantic trade, the Turkish conquest set back the development of the eastern part of the Danube region, showing no signs of catching up economically with Western Europe. The 19th century saw an upsurge of development in the Danube countries and the expansion of transport needs, and a concomitant emergence of the railway as the major competitor of navigation. As a result of this belatedness, the construction of canals and waterways and inland waterway transport networks characterising Western Europe could not be completed. The peace treaty concluding World War 1 imposed harsh terms on the defeated states, nevertheless, the Danube maintained its status as an international waterway. Post-World War 2, the Danube region came under the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, triggering the signature of the Belgrade Convention in 1948, which, after a long period of time, granted control of the Danube to the riparian states. However, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Austria and the installation of the Iron Curtain created a political and economic divide. This division did not favour passenger transport and international tourism, and the sector has been struggling to overcome its long-standing implications ever since.

The need to undertake costly infrastructural investments and the competition between various modes of transport are serious obstacles to the development of river cruise tourism. The lack of joint action between coastal countries and the failure to remove administrative barriers are equally problematic. These problems are not so relevant for cruise tourism. For one thing, the requirements it sets for navigation are easier to meet than those of cargo shipping, besides, coastal infrastructure does not require substantial investment, and smaller regional ports can be developed easier to accommodate cruise ships. Given the availability of the necessary conditions and the provision of cruise ships by private foreign companies, the expansion of the sector does

not demand within-state or international cooperation. Additional infrastructural requirements include suitable air connections between points of departure and arrival and the presence of a major international airport. Naturally, riverside attractions corresponding to the thematic cruises are also required, offering excellent and unimpeded accessibility (Miskolczi et al. 2020) as well as high level tourist services. A notable difference vis-à-vis conventional market-imposed requirements for tourist destinations is the lower demand for high-quality accommodation, given the provision of accommodation by the vessels themselves.

Despite its development potential, Danube cruise tourism is facing major challenges. The purpose of the present study is to highlight the significance of security and cross-border permeability for the operation of the sector.

#### Literature review

Within the Hungarian literature on river cruise tourism, the works of Jászberényi are of paramount importance. These include an overview of the general features and trends of maritime and inland navigation (Pálfalvi & Jászberényi 2006), an in-depth analysis of the Danube river cruise market, the relationship between Budapest and river cruise tourism, and the characteristics of supply (Jászberényi 2019). In addition, he also studied the niché experiences and regional effects of Danube river cruise tourism (Jászberényi & Miskolczi 2020). The accessibility of the major cities of Central and Eastern Europe in Danube tourism has also been the subject of a recent analysis (Miskolczi et al 2020). Domestic studies are also available on river cruise tourism, covering target groups, attractions, product and marketing characteristics (Pókó 2018, 2019). A study on the geopolitical relations of water transport and tourism highlights the primary significance of natural geography (Kovács 2017, p.10).

The issue of tourism and security has long been present in the literature, emerging in parallel with the theoretical underpinnings of the scientific discipline and still featuring on the agenda today (Lengyel 2004, Michalkó 2012 p.266, Michalkó 2020, Sava 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the issue back to the fore, compelling tourism researchers to rethink the role of security within the system of tourism. Precendents to the examination of the relationship between border control and tourism also exist (Rizecz 2021), and researchers have studied border policies, the changes of border control and cross-border permeability under the pandemic (Hajdú & Rácz 2020). A book chapter investigates the role of security and environmental sustainability of Danube cruise tourism (Nagy 2022, Nagy & Spiegler 2023).

The connections between sustainable tourism and cruise shipping has also been extensively researched (Csete & Szécsi 2015, Gonda 2022a). The decline in tourism due to the pandemic and the outbreak of the war has brought the issue of the sector's crisis resilience and recoverability to the fore (Pókó 2021, Gonda 2022b). A new aspect is the provision of unimpeded accessibility and the relevant research into enabling and innovative solutions (Irimiás et al 2018, Raffay & Gonda 2020, Gonda & Raffay 2021).

#### **Research methods**

This research draws on secondary sources. A review of the relevant national literature on river cruise tourism and safety was conducted. In our investigation of river cruise tourism, we relied on data from the Danube Commission, while also making extensive use of the domestic literature and industry reports (CCNR 2019, 2021, p.136), which provide a rich source of data and in-depth analyses.

We have used the Henley Passport Index (HPI), which expresses the number of countries that a passport holder can enter visa-free. The evolution of the indicator was examined between 2006 and 2021 on the basis of data from Henley&Partners (https://www.henleyglobal.com/passport-index). The index and its content are derived from the data provided by the International Air Transport Authority (IATA), which were supplemented, modified and updated through extensive internal research and open source online data. The index covers 199 different passports and 227 travel destinations.

For our analysis of the security situation in the Danube countries, we relied on the Global Peace Index (GPI) developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), which is the world's leading measure of global peacefulness. The report presents the most comprehensive data-driven analysis to date of the trends in peacefulness, its economic value and the means of building peaceful societies. Covering 99.7% of the world's population, GPI uses 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators from authoritative sources and measures the state of peacefulness in three areas, namely the level of social security and protection, the size of ongoing domestic and international conflicts, and the level of militarisation. The analysed indices are weighted in terms of the level of internal peace in a country by the Global Peace Index. A weight of 60 percent is applied to the measure of internal peace and a weight of 40 percent to the measure of external peace (https://www.visionofhumanity.org/).

In the issue of security, the paper reviews the historical, geopolitical and economic processes that have shaped the development of Danube cruise tourism over the last twenty years.

#### **Research results**

#### The development of Danube cruise tourism in the 21st century

For the purpose of our investigation we analysed the volume of cruise shipping traffic and the basic trends in the sector. As illustrated by the graph below (Figure 1), the river cruise tourism sector has witnessed dynamic development over the last 20 years, which was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend can be contrasted with the perceived decline in freight transport, compensating the lower exploitation of the waterway network. The main European fluvial transport route is the Danube-Main-Rhine route. The volume of Danube cruise shipping traffic doubled between 2002 and 2011, and has been steadily increasing. In 2020, the pandemic triggered a 90% decline, mainly due to the vast majority of guests belonging to the senior citizen category and the large number of overseas passengers arriving to Europe by air.

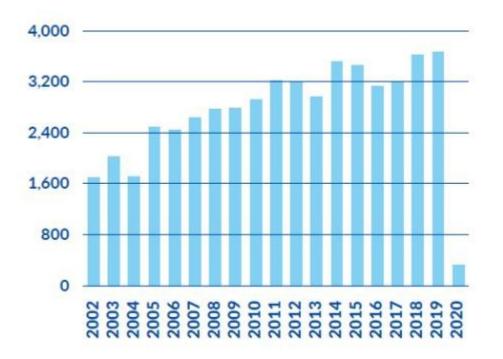


Figure 1: Number of cruise ships in transit on the Danube, 2002-2020. Source: CCNR 2021

Traffic in river cruise tourism mostly affects the upper and middle sections of the Danube River, with a significant decrease below Mohács. Passenger shipping and tourism are also significant in the Danube Delta, however, cross-country routes are not prevalent. Regarding the number of vessels crossing the respective borders, the Gabčíkovo (Bős) barrage (between Slovakia and Hungary) shows the highest traffic. In 2019, over 5,000 vessels crossed it, demonstrating the popularity of the Vienna-Budapest route. Jochenstein (at the border between Germany and Austria) is a busy crossing point for cruise ships arriving from the Rhine and the Main. Budapest is a popular point of departure or destination for these cruises, as it is easily accessible by air and a highly attractive destination (Miskolczi et al. 2020). The traffic is apparently significantly lower at Mohács (the border between Hungary, Croatia and Serbia), given that Serbia is not an EU member state and the tourism offer differs from the downstream section of the river (Figure 2).

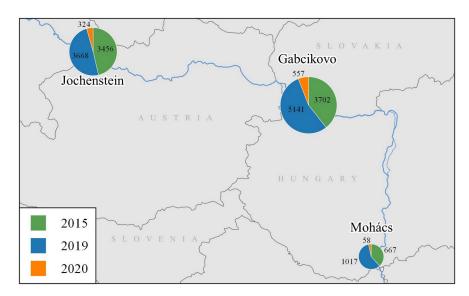


Figure 2. Evolution of the number of cruise ships at each crossing point between 2015 and 2020. Source: own compilation based on data of the Danube Commission

Passenger turnover on each section corresponds to the number of vessels, with significantly fewer passengers traversing Mohács. The total number of passengers on cruise ships at Gabčíkovo (Bős) exceeded 700,000 in 2019, showing a nearly 30 percent increase since 2015 (Figure 3). Albeit at a lower scale, passenger traffic on vessels traversing Mohács shows a notable rise. In the meantime, passenger turnover along the border between Germany and Austria is stagnating.

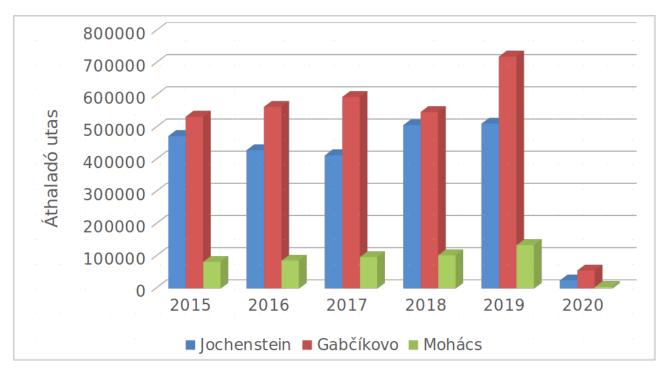


Figure 3: Evolution of the number of passengers at each crossing point between 2015 and 2020. Source: own compilation based on data of the Danube Commission

#### The role of security in the development of Danube cruise tourism

There are three enabling conditions of the development of Danube cruise tourism that remain largely outside the control and influence of the sector. First, the permeability of borders to ensure that the cruise is uninterrupted, or subject only to minor controls. Second, facilitating transit for citizens of the sending countries to riparian destination countries, preferably without visas. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the security situation, the existence of peaceful states that can guarantee the security of tourists.

The state of security in the Danube countries has shown a gradual amelioration since the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. The EU enlargement process has facilitated the accession of the riparian countries to the Single Economic Area, while at the same time reinforcing the stability of their political and security situation. Austria joined the EU in 1997, Hungary and Slovakia in 2004, Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, Croatia in 2013 and Serbia has been a candidate country since 2014. The Schengen Convention, quintessential from the point of view of border crossing, is neither enforced by the EU member states of Romania and Bulgaria, nor by the candidate country of Serbia (Rácz 2014). The latter three have been striving to enforce common border controls, but

without success, mainly due to the resistance from Schengen states. Progress was made in 2023 with the adhesion of Croatia, but Romania and Bulgaria are still awaiting accession. From a security point of view, the NATO enlargement process in Eastern Europe is highly significant, with the successive adhesion of Danube countries, in addition to Austria and Serbia: Hungary in 1999, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania in 2004, and Croatia in 2009.

This process has triggered the unprecedented economic and political integration of the Danube countries. The security situation and the permeability of borders have never been so favourable. Despite the disagreements and unresolved disputes between countries, the 21st century has seen neither military conflicts nor the exercise of military pressure in the region.

The Henley Passport Index (HPI) is a measure that expresses the number of countries that a passport holder can travel to visa-free. The graph below (Figure 4) indicates the trend of the increasing number of accessible countries among the countries of the Danube. The rate of increase over 15 years fluctuated between 30 % and 60 % for the respective countries.

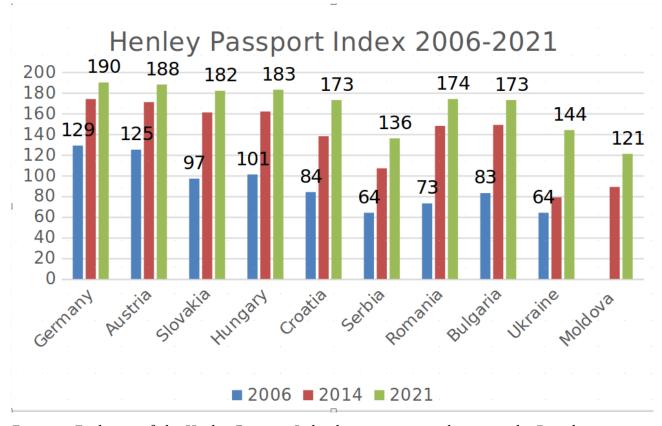


Figure 4: Evolution of the Henley Passport Index between 2006 and 2021 in the Danube countries. Source: own compilation based on data from https://www.henleyglobal.com/passport-index

Looking at the data, it is possible to delineate four distinct groups. The first group includes Germany and Austria, which started from a relatively high value and, with an over 30% growth, provide one of the most valuable passports in the world for their citizens. The second group covers Slovakia and Hungary, which started from a lower baseline and have managed to catch up successfully, with their growth rates exceeding 45% compared to a relatively high baseline. Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria, belonging to the third group, have received lower HPI values. However, the scores of the EU Member States outside the Schengen Area show the most significant rise. This over 50% increase is only exceeded by Romania's score of 58%, the highest among the countries examined. Finally, the fourth group covers non-EU member states, which started from a low base and achieved high HPI scores, but have been significantly lagging behind in terms of the passport-related benefits of the rest of the Danube countries.

A crucial question for river cruise tourism is the number of countries that a passenger can enter visa-free. Despite the bilateral nature of these conventions, the more developed countries do not permit entry with private passports from the majority of African and Asian countries. In the case of Hungary, in 2022, citizens of 133 countries were able to travel visa-free, while individuals with private passports were able to travel to 93 countries. However, this shortened list also includes the majority of sending countries, with the exception of Russia and China.

As far as passengers from visa-requiring countries are concerned, a uniform visa valid for stays with a duration of no longer than 90 days is required within the Schengen area. In the case of round trips, applying for a visa is required in the country of the first border crossing. The Schengen visa can be issued for tourism purposes and is subject to a uniform set of requirements (Regulation No 2018/1806, Regulation (EC) No 810/2009), while for stays exceeding 90 days, the relevant regulations of a given member state determine the requirements for entry.

For Danube cruise shipping, it is easier for passengers to obtain the required visas for entry when visiting only Schengen states. In case the cruise includes passengers from countries requiring a visa, this may be a factor worth considering when planning the cruise. One of the major cruise operators (Viking Cruises) has 11 voyages listed in its 2023 offer, three of which involve non-Schengen states. On its website (https://www.vikingrivercruises.com/), the company tends to overlook visa regulations, drawing attention only to the visa requirements that apply to US citizens, while also offering visa management services.

Another important issue is passenger security, with implications on the planning of cruises. The state of security in the Danube countries is indicated by the Global Peace Index (GPI) scores and their evolution. When examining the individual countries, Austria stands out not only as one of the region's most peaceful countries, but also as one of the most peaceful countries in the world,

despite a slight deterioration in its scores in recent years. The situation is favourable in most of the Danube countries, with Germany, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria all achieving high scores, indicating an overall improving trend. The situation is less favourable in Serbia and Moldova, which rather belong to the group of non-EU states. Ukraine falls into a different category, with its low GPI already in 2021 (Figure 5). An analysis of the recently occurring changes indicates that Croatia, Moldova and Ukraine have managed to achieve a significant improvement in their position.

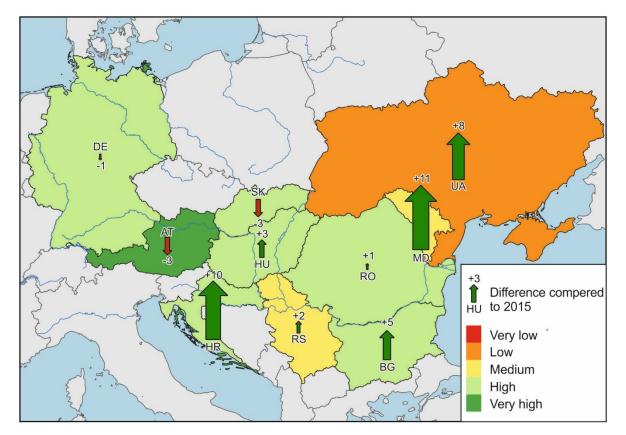


Figure 5: Evolution of the Global Peace Index in the Danube countries, 2015-2021. Source: own compilation based on data from https://www.visionofhumanity.org

This favourable situation will be put to the test by the Russian-Ukrainian war breaking out in 2022, which highlighted the existence of possible fault lines (Polish-Hungarian relations, the crisis in V4 cooperation, Serbia's separate security policy, the security situation in Kosovo). The transformation of the world order poses a challenge for the countries of the Western Balkans, becoming once again the foci of geopolitical rivalries between the great powers, exploiting traditional fault lines (REMÉNYI et al. 2021). The GPI scores of 2022 indicate a significant decline in the case of Ukraine, downgraded to the status of the least peaceful countries. The decline was also visible in the case of Moldova, Romania and Serbia, triggering a slight deterioration in their rankings. Hungary and Croatia have further improved their position by joining Austria among

the top 15 most peaceful countries, while positive changes were also detected in the case of Slovakia and Bulgaria.

Border permeability was temporarily disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, implying considerable security risks and putting inter-state relations to the test. The earlier dreams of a "borderless Europe" were crushed in no time (Hajdú & Rácz 2020) and the regulation of border permeability was transferred to the nation-state level. The slow recovery was surrounded by caution and mistrust. The issue of security in tourism has been reassessed and a new approach has been adopted. Adaptability and resilience are key to the recovery of the sector (Gonda 2022b).

For the Danube cruise tourism sector, the 2019 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war of 2022 mark the end of a very positive two-decade-long process. The integration process was interrupted by Serbia's accession to the EU and the failure to extend the Schengen area. We argue that the outlined integration process, border permeability and the security situation are key pre-requisites for the development of Danube cruise shipping. The integration process has also been a factor influencing the marked increase of overall traffic (Figure 1), besides offering a partial explanation for the heterogenous traffic data of various river sections (Figure 2).

#### Summary

Overall, there has been a dynamic expansion of traffic in Danube cruise tourism over the past two decades, with growth observed in the case of each indicator. Namely, the increase in the number of vessels, the number of newly constructed vessels, the number of operating companies, the number of tourist programmes and the number of passengers. This has led to a marked expansion in shipping traffic, particularly along the upper and middle sections of the Danube River.

We argue that the integration process to the EU and NATO are a major pre-requisite for the development of Danube cruise tourism. In addition, it has been a factor influencing the marked increase in overall traffic, moreover, it can be regarded as an underlying cause of the heterogenous traffic figures of various river sections. Country-specific entry rules mainly benefit the Schengen states, however, they do not imply a significant competitive disadvantage for the rest of the EU member states either. Serbia, Ukraine and Moldova offer less favourable conditions for entry. The security situation in these latter countries can be judged as poor by the organisers and passengers alike. These factors are also believed to contribute to the lower traffic observed along the section below Mohács and the under-utilisation of the Danube Delta.

The 2020 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022, representing serious obstacles to sustainable development, mark the end of a favourable two-decade-long process that led to economic and political stability. The future of integration looks promising with Croatia joining the system of common border management in 2023. Border permeability was temporarily disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed considerable security risks and put inter-state relations to the test. From a security perspective, the transforming world order is momentarily unfavourable for the entire region. It remains to be seen whether the territory of the Danube region will be characterised by long-term stability or ongoing conflicts and divisions.

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