

Town - Country - River – Europe

A contribution by Peter Langer



A river is powerful. This is certainly true for the Danube. It flows almost three thousand kilometres from the Black Forest to the Black Sea - a natural link from the west across Europe to its other end in the southeast: a European miracle. The Danube connects ten European countries, old and new democracies, various peoples and cultures. Over one hundred million people live along its banks. The Danube is always in motion, with the power of sinking ships and flooding cities. However, there is one thing it cannot do: pause.

But we as humans can pause and reflect. It is time, 15 years after the start of the new Danube activities, which were launched in Ulm to review and to re-orientate in order to shape the future of the Danube project.

Why Ulm?

Ulm has a long history with and around the Danube. The Danube Swabians moved down the river in their “Ulmer Schachteln” (simple wooden boats) in search of a new home in what is now southern Hungary, the Batschka and the Banat region. They settled there from sheer necessity and over the centuries they created fertile

landscapes and lived peacefully with other ethnic groups. From Ulm there was a bustling traffic on the river to Southeast Europe. One fact should not go unmentioned: not far from Ulm, world class prehistoric works of art have been found, which proves that our region has already been part of a common settlement area of early Homo Sapiens for tens of thousands of years: the Danube basin as a cradle of civilization in Europe.

All this is history.

A new chapter has been opened.

Today, many people living in and around Ulm are re-discovering their personal Danube history, their "Danube identity", because of a personal relation to regions and countries along the Danube, be it with Danube Swabian or other roots. Next year, the 300th return of the first Danube Swabian journey will be celebrated in Ulm and long before the great political changes the Society of Danube Fellows went down the Danube in their "Ulmer Schachteln" to establish new contacts and make friends. Ulm is located in the centre of the European transport corridor Paris – Budapest. With its Bavarian sister city New Ulm it is the first major city along the Danube. All this makes the Danube activities of Ulm "authentic," as stated by the former Baden-Württemberg Minister President and current EU Energy Commissioner Günther H. Oettinger. Additionally there were decisions that in retrospect have been proven to be wise and decisive.

Culture as a door opener

The great European and founding father of the European Community, Jean Monnet is rumoured to have said: "If I had to do it again, I would start with culture rather than the economy."

In Ulm, we did begin with culture. After an initial Danube Festival East-West in 1989 - shortly before the Wall came down as an almost prophetic event that was for some time buried in oblivion – a journey made by the City Council of Ulm, with an "Ulmer Schachtel", to Budapest in 1995 gave the impetus for the "new" Danube activities for the upcoming years. The open borders, the encounters with the people and political partners, the interest in a common European future, new friendships and contacts that persist to this day – gave the political leaders of Ulm the desire to "use the

Danube as a source of inspiration for the city” - in other words: to position Ulm as a European city at the Danube.

That was the basis for the jointly taken decision in 1997 to host together with the city of New Ulm, an International Danube Festival, with the aim to gather artists, guests and representatives from all Danube countries on the banks of our two cities. In 1998, the first Danube festival under the motto "New River Banks" was organized. There were truly "new banks" that were to be discovered – unknown music and theatre groups, and musicians from Southeast Europe at this festival are now world music and Balkan sound stars, which inspire the international music scene.



Two events were particularly impressive: Ulm’s city hall hosted the first meeting of political representatives from the cities on the Danube. Along with representatives from Linz, Budapest, the Romanian Galati and the Bulgarian Ruse, the mayor of Vukovar in Croatia, a city which has been almost completely destroyed a few years earlier and his Serbian counterpart from Novi Sad in Serbia, sat chair to chair at the Council table - at a time, when this would have been impossible in their home countries. Indeed it became even better: after the mayor of Vukovar had made a fiery speech against the "Serb aggressors," he and his colleague from Novi Sad were inseparable for the next two days. Until today there is an exceptionally close partnership between Ulm, Vukovar and Novi Sad.

The festival opened with György Konrád's "Danube hearing" on the cathedral square. "Look at me, says the Danube, I am vast, beautiful and wise. Throughout Europe I have no equal. I would like to stretch out in full length along your towns. Settle down on my banks, I will be your main road."

These phrases did not only sound wonderful, when the great European poet presented them with his sonorous voice, they are the programmatic anticipation of the message of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Back then nobody could have imagined the anticipatory force in these words: Eight years later, the first Danube Conference, held in the Baden-Württemberg State Representation in Brussels, which was initiated and organized from Ulm had the title: "Danube - Main Road of Europe ". At this conference the EU Commissioner for Regional Policy at that time, Danuta Hübner, formulated for the first time the idea of a separate European strategy for the Danube region.

Lucky coincidences, the subjective factors, should not be concealed. These are the people involved: a credible and charismatic mayor of Ulm, who was and still is vigorously representing the message, passionate players, communicators, committed Europeans, partners and supporters in local politics, economics and science.

About the "Ulm Process"...

The following years are only sketched here. The mottoes of the Danube festivals seem in retrospect like road marking.

We headed 1998 for "New River Banks", discovered the Danube as "Main Road" (2000) and as "Dream River to Europe" (2002), and gathered in 2004 with artists and guests in our "Café Europe". In 2006 we pursued questions about Romanian and Bulgarian expectations of Europe as new EU members and associated hopes of Serbia and Croatia under the topic "MY DANUBE - Views on the Flow. Views on Europe". The current discussion about Europe was anticipated in 2008 by the Danube Festival, when we asked for ways of developing a European identity; "Home Europe?".

And by 2010 the motto "Mama Duna" put the Danube itself in the focus as a source of life and as a valuable and sensitive area of unspoiled nature. It was an explicit reference to the major environmental challenges that are associated with the European Danube Strategy.



It has been crucial that the Danube festival has also always identified itself as one with a political character, which has been particularly perceived in the partner countries, cities, and regions. Additionally there were other institutional milestones. First, in the year 2000 the “Donauschwäbisches Zentralmuseum” was opened, where until today a modern and exciting engagement with past and present Danube Swabian settlement history and its current meaning is taking place. Second, again as a result of an “Ulmer Schachtel” journey of the City Council of Ulm in 2001, the Danube Office Ulm was founded as a project and development agency for the cooperation in culture, science, politics and the environmental issues. The accuracy of creating an institution alongside the Danube Festival for permanent cooperation was shown by the fact that shortly afterwards a dozen cities along the river Danube founded other such agencies as partner institutions. A variety of environmental, educational, cultural and research projects, conferences and meetings were launched and coordinated by the Danube offices in the following years. Finally in 2008 the European Danube Academy was set up in Ulm as a new platform for science, education and culture in the Danube region. There have been - since 2010 as independent institution - discussions and work about issues of historical and current social, political and environmental developments along the Danube: a "think tank" for the Danube region.

The variety of Ulm’s Danube initiatives and the emanating institutional networking in the European Danube region, a result of these initiatives, shows sustained effect: to

this day, the new development of European cooperation in the Danube is widely known in Budapest, Belgrade and Bucharest as the "Ulm Process".

... the EU Strategy for the Danube Region

Finally, this acknowledgment and recognition was as well seen in Brussels: In February 2010 the first of five stakeholder conferences of the EU Commission on EU-Strategy for the Danube Region took place in Ulm and was organized jointly with the Danube Office. The Danube conferences in the Baden-Württemberg's State Representation in Brussels in 2006, 2008 and 2010 and the "Ulm Summit" with government representatives from all Danube countries in May 2009 played an important role in prior to the decision, to bring the strategy forward. The key points and decisions were set and taken here, which eventually led in June 2009 the European Council to instruct the Commission to develop by 2010 a Strategy for the Danube Region - the second European macro-regional strategy after the Baltic Sea Strategy.

Conclusion: The "Ulm Process" has essentially helped to bring the EU Strategy for the Danube Region forward.

Ulm: Danube Competence Centre in Baden-Württemberg

Baden-Württemberg is Danube's state of origin. For a long time already the Baden-Württemberg state government maintains specifically bilateral relations with countries along the Danube - in the form of mixed government commissions with Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and since 2009 also with Serbia – this incidentally was also an initiative from Ulm. Above all, the previously mentioned conferences in Brussels, which were organised together with Ulm, triggered an approach to the entire Danube basin as part of the Baden-Württemberg's European policy. Frankly speaking, for the state government in Stuttgart it has been noticeable difficult to accept the importance of the Danube Swabian activities from the modest little Town of Ulm to be integrated without reservation in their own European policy. With the cabinet decision of the new state government in Stuttgart in June 2011 on EU-Strategy of the Danube Region, new signals are set. It says: "The city of Ulm has a pioneering role. Since the late 1990s it has developed as a competence centre for the Danube region, through the creation of the International Danube Festival, the

“Donauschwäbisches Zentralmuseum”, the Danube Office and the European Danube Academy (...) and it contributed significantly to the EU Danube Strategy, in the context of the Baden-Württemberg European policy. The EU Commission, the European Parliament, the Committee of the regions and especially the Danube riparian states highly regard the efforts of Baden-Württemberg and Ulm". The decision emphasizes the cooperation with the Council of the Danube Cities and Regions in particular: "The city of Ulm thereby plays a prominent role, as Ulm`s mayor is president of the Council of the Danube Cities and Regions and it holds the coordinating role within the Council with its Danube representative"

From this, it is also possible to derive a new approach of the state policy, namely the recognition of local structures and responsibilities in implementing the EU Danube strategy in Baden-Württemberg: Ulm could also institutionally become a competence centre, in which tasks and activities associated with the strategy will be delegated to Ulm on the Danube from Stuttgart on the Neckar. This can also be seen as a question of authenticity.

The cooperation of the Danube cities and regions is the basis of the EU Danube Region Strategy

Only the latest and perhaps most important initiative that came from Ulm was the establishment of the Council of the Danube Cities and Regions (CoDCR) at the IVth Conference of the Danube Cities and Regions in Budapest in June 2009. There were previous conferences in Ulm (2003), in the Serbian city of Novi Sad (2005) and in the Bulgarian city of Vidin (2007). The Council of the Danube Cities and Regions - yet an informal organization - is a representative body to the European institutions, as a competence and network organization and the voice of civil society in the Danube region.



Source: CoDCR Bukarest 2011

A few weeks ago, in June 2011, the Fifth Conference was held in Belgrade, the Lord Mayor of Ulm was re-elected to the presidium with his counterparts from Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest, Belgrade and Bucharest and other representatives of the cooperating Danube cities and regions. The specific recognition of the CoDCR from the EU Commission was made clear, as it is intended to be an important partner for the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.

In the "Belgrade Declaration" of 3 June 2011, it is stated that "the Council wants to fulfil its representation and networking role in a responsible and committed way as a strategic partner of the EU Commission, especially in the 'Strengthening the Danube Region by increasing the institutional capacity and cooperation'. The CoDCR will expand these functions by pursuing the establishment of appropriate structures in order to contribute to the development of a strong economically, politically and culturally interconnected European macro-region along the Danube. The goal is the establishment of political, administrative and information structures by constant know-how transfer, project development and counselling. "

The over one hundred and fifty representatives of the Danube cities and regions assembled in Belgrade agreed that the Danube region will be developed to a

European trademark over the next few years. The entire Danube region is culturally and historically closely linked. Because of its diversity of languages, cultures, religions, economic and political systems it is a heterogeneous space, whose convergence is difficult to achieve without a shared sense of belonging to this region and a common understanding of regional identity: "unity in diversity".

The EU Danube strategy can strengthen these ties through cultural, scientific, civic and communal cooperation. As a consequence, there will be a promotion of social and cultural commonalities, but also of their diversity: hence an important impetus for the development of regional and European identity of the people who live in this area.

The foundation and guarantee of the bond in the Danube region is the cooperation of cities and regions that have merged in CoDCR. The people, especially young people, who live in those cities and regions, want to be reached by the European Union's Strategy for the Danube Region.

At last in the next few years the success or failure of the EU Danube Strategy will prove whether the whole European project succeeds.

Let us show our colours: Ulm on the Danube - Ulm in Europe

Our companion, the great Danube European Dr. Erhard Busek has once said in Ulm: "When there is no arise of European identity in the Danube region, where can it be then?"

Translated into Ulm's conditions, this could mean: If Ulm cannot position itself as a European city in the Danube region, then which city can?

Of course, there are concrete projects, which connect Ulm for example, through the Danube Office or the European Danube Academy with partners along the Danube as part of the Danube Strategy. Indeed there is an economic cooperation that will be further developed and consolidated, but the political horizon and the perspectives that have been opened with Ulm's Danube policy are broader. The mere questioning of the benefits and the economic purpose as justification for our activities and efforts falls too short.

We have to agree, especially in these times, that Ulm's Danube activities above all

contribute in a very concrete way to the European project. The mayor of Ulm will not tire of stressing that the future of Europe is a Europe of cities and regions and the Danube policy of Ulm has to be seen in this context. Hence the policy is forming a brand and ensures Ulm's lasting reputation far beyond the city boundaries.

For months now, in all daily newspapers and weekly magazines, the "Euro-scepticism" plays a dominant role. As a great political project of the present and the future, the creation of common European house, the "United States of Europe", is more and more disputed, considering the on-going financial and debt crisis and the resurgence of nationalist, right-wing populist and anti-European tendencies. Especially in the Danube basin, the latest developments in Hungary are a striking example. Overall, the enthusiasm for a European Danube Policy has waned too.

On the other hand, there is remarkable fact, which applies to the European Danube region: The progress that has been reached with the European integration and monetary union, the common economic space, free movement and mobility, has become political self-evident in recent decades in that they are easily overlooked or undervalued. It is in Europe a cheap political ploy to make Brussels responsible for our own national shortcomings.

The Danube region is also a good example for this limited shifted perception. Only a few years ago the Danube was primarily a river of borders and war, which makes us think of the bloody events in the wars in former Yugoslavia with its genocides, expulsions, the tremendous suffering.

Today, in contrast, the Danube is a sustainable river of peace. Now it can also be river of European citizens. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region in its core holds this purpose: to bring the citizens along the Danube after the lasting peace alongside democracy, rule of law, a clean environment, wealth, education and freedom of movement.

No one has the audacity to claim that Ulm alone can even remotely accomplish these challenges with its Danube activities. But it can - with a long breath and passion - make a discernible contribution. However, the European Commission defined a parameter for the implementation of the EU Danube Strategy: "no new institutions", which is from particular importance to Ulm. In Ulm we do not need new institutions at

this point in time. For every action and project area we have renowned, well-working institutions: The Danube Festival, The Danube Office, The European Danube Academy, the "Donauschwäbisches Zentralmuseum" and other civic initiatives. The cooperation and networking to optimize the existing institutions and to pool their skills, creativity and skills, is the basis for the successful continuation of Ulm's Danube policy.

The Council of the Danube Cities and Regions that was initiated and controlled in Ulm can give an additional and central contribution by initiating projects that contribute to the development of civil society as the creation of a European Danube youth work or the trainee program "Democracy, Self-Government and Citizens' Participation" for political and administrative actors in the Danube region in consultation with the EU Commission.

The former Lord Mayor of Budapest, Dr. Gabor Demszky, has once defined the role of Ulm in the big Danube game as "the small city with great ideas". This perception and recognition has to be expanded.

The mayor of Ulm and members of city council have learned how naturally and openly they were welcomed by the mayors, district presidents and political representatives as partners and friends a few weeks ago on their last "Ulmer Schachtel" journey on visits to Belgrade, Smederevo, Turnu Severin and Vidin. We enjoyed the warm hospitality, which is connected to the Danube partnership and the wonderful Danube landscapes.

The willingness to meet partners on equal terms is a quality, a hallmark of Ulm's people. Translated into the language of the EU: The people of Ulm can use their "soft skills" and their profound expertise to provide a unique contribution to the development of European identity in the Danube region. It does not depend on the size - compared with the mighty river in Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria, the Danube in Ulm is more of a narrow beck - in all modesty it depends on expertise and visionary power. These qualities of Ulm are important for Europe and the European Danube region.

Bringing together experts and institutions, synergy and presentation opportunities for the partners in the Danube countries and the EU, provision of seminar and guests rooms for example as a residence for writers and artists in a "house of the Danube cities and regions" - as suggested from the ranks of Ulm's City Council - could be a trend-setting call.

The city shows its colours: in the country, along the Danube, in Europe. Ulm can become the "Geneva" of the European Danube region.



This closes the circle. Let it end with the last sentences of the "Danube-hearing" by György Konrád: "You can start all over again; my patience is much bigger than yours. You start much, but you do little, it is cooked with water everywhere, the raven is not blacker than its wings. Wash your shirt in me, and risk a new beginning, but now at last with decency. "

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