



The Hungarian poet *Attila József* was sitting on the bottom stone of the wharf (as he wrote in his poem *By the Danube*, some time around 1935), watching a melon rind floating away. The melon rind may have fallen in the water ten metres upstream or drifted by the foams for several kilometres.

Whatever has been brought and/or taken by the river, which is “past, present and future” and whose “waves are all-embracing in a soft caress” or fiercely chase each other? The Danube is the artery of Hungary, flowing across its heart. Without its pulsation, life would be unthinkable in this area. It brings and gives what nourishes and takes what is harmful.

But it can and does bring damage too, and it sometimes washes away our essential needs.

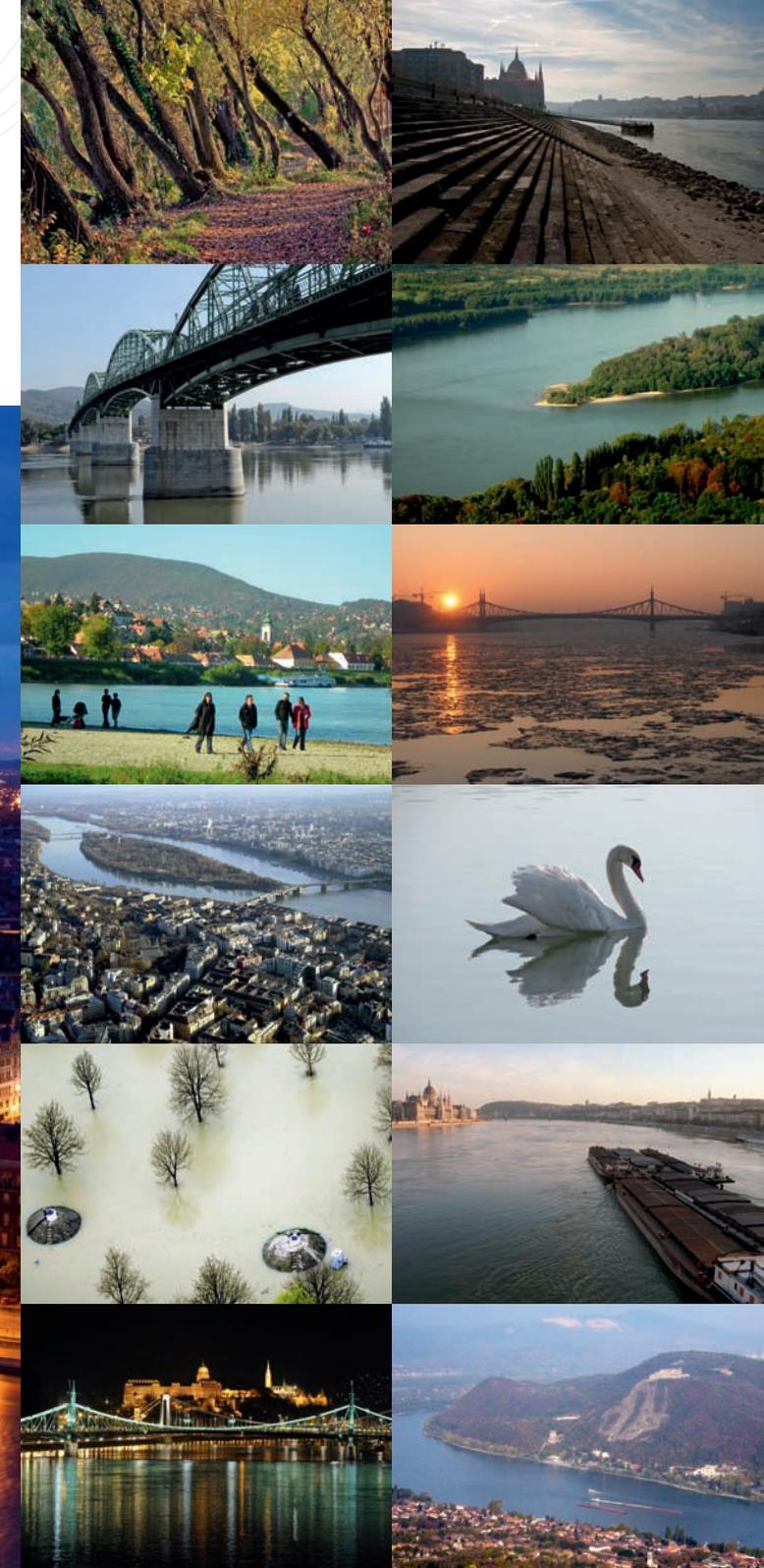
We both love and fear this calm and capricious mighty power, which can be used wisely but cannot be foolishly harnessed without serious consequences, which we must protect and be protected against at times, and which has been with people in this land for thousands of years now.

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The Danube





The Danube is the second largest river in Europe

(after the Volga) in terms of length, catchment area and water output. Its source is considered to be in Germany's Black Forest at the junction of two streams, the Breg and the Brigach, from where it flows for 2850 km (1771 miles) before reaching the Black Sea. However, the Danube is indisputably number one in the world for connecting ten countries (Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia and Ukraine), crossing the western, central and eastern parts of the continent. It is obviously the most European river with several names (Donau, Dunaj, Dunav, Dunarea, Duna) that mean all the same.

The river, once called Ister by the Romans, was both a connection and a dividing line between peoples during history: "lengthwise" it connects, "crosswise" it divides. Even today the Danube is a boundary between Hungary and Slovakia, Croatia and Serbia, Serbia and Romania, Romania and Bulgaria, Romania and Moldavia as well as Ukraine. At the same time it is a waterway that connects them not only with each other, but also to North-West Europe via the Rhine–Main–Danube Canal. When the continent's countries strive for economic and political unity, with an increasing number of states wishing to join its implemented form, the European Union, we cannot neglect this natural connection and apparently inexhaustible source of life and resource. This idea appears in the comprehensive development strategy for the Danube Region, which will be accepted in the first half of 2011, when Hungary holds the Presidency of the EU.

The regional development strategy should pay special attention to the protection of the Danube. The river and its environment is a peculiar habitat, environmentalists say, and politicians should agree, because man and his habitats are in bigger need of protection than the region's flora and fauna. With its share of 417 km (259 miles) of the Danube,

Hungary is keen on preventing any conflict between development and the preservation of values.

The Danube has been navigable since prehistoric times, with passenger and goods transport conducted still nowadays. Many experts call for more reliance on waterways in the future. According to reasonable estimates, this would be cheaper than road or railway transport but can only be economical as long as it does not damage the environment. Otherwise a situation can arise where what seems to be cheaper to a narrow minded business group costs an immense and unaffordable sum. Hungary has presented a clear position: navigation on the Danube is important and must be developed. However, it is not the river that has to fit ships but the other way round. The agreement accepted by European nations stipulates that the Danube should be made navigable for 240 days with a navigation breadth of 180 meters (197 yards). Hungary has met both requirements. At the same time, all further criteria are only recommendations and not obligations.

The habitat of the Danube should not only be an important value in need of protection for environmentalists with a temperament of Saint Francis. For the river has nourished man and has provided many people work for a living for thousands of years. At the same time, the fish population is dwindling, fishermen are few and far between, and ancient water-side crafts have disappeared, including water millers and gold washers. The wave of time has swept them away, so to say, and hopefully this will be the fate of the zeal to intervene at all times by erecting successive sets of dams and forcing the immense water into concrete troughs. Again, the Hungarian position is clear: we do not want to build a dam on the Danube. We can and must use the power of the river, but considering many other aspects. Power generation, water management, flood control and transport should not have conflicting requirements. During its term of Presidency, Hungary can play a key role in developing the global scale Danube Strategy, which is now in preparation. This will provide us an opportunity to launch a number of development programs that are also in the interest of Hungarian economy with the European Union's assistance.

Water is life. Water is an asset. Europe's largest drinking water supply lies beneath Hungary. This is a priceless value for us, if not only ours. Its preservation is vital and we are liable for it to the whole European Union. Endangering this drinking water supply would be a capital crime. This could be the first and foremost aspect (beside many others) of a proactive Danube Strategy that concentrated on common interests. This matter is closely linked to the prevention of ecological catastrophes.

Johann Strauss, the composer of Vienna, was still celebrating the Blue Danube with his famous waltz in the early 19th century, and the river was still suitable for drinking seventy or eighty years ago. But it is no longer blue, and it is not recommendable to drink from it. The Danube

and its tributaries have carried a lot of water, much of it contaminated, and its catchment area has accumulated a lot of waste, also in a figurative sense. This habitat has been disturbed by a great deal of troubled passions and a deluge of impure words. We have witnessed, suffered, and sometimes perpetrated, many a well poisoning in this Danube region. Originally meant to be a state boundary, the river has at times separated brothers and sisters, confronting peoples on the opposite banks as enemies, with stumps of bridges standing up as the torsos of hatred. Since then bridges have also been built on the Danube in an integrating Europe. The boundary river has become traversable in various sites, but passage is still hampered by individual, family and national injuries, the historical memory and current conflicting interests.

A liveable Danube region is the desire underlying the development of the emerging Danube Strategy. A really liveable region is not only subject to ecological, economic and political but also on cultural – put simply, human – preconditions and requirements. We, the peoples living together or just beside each other for centuries have accumulated lots of debts in this respect. Indeed, what we could not really achieve for centuries, we no longer strived for during decades: to find out more about the history, culture, ideas and emotional experience of others. If we are to implement a liveable Danube region within a unifying Europe, these nations should look at each other with a sincere interest. Cross-border cultural programs, twinning relations, sports events and tourism have contributed and should contribute to this goal. We must spare no opportunity to clean our experiences of prejudices, our injuries of vengeance, and our differences of aversion. This is the only way to turn a forcible common fate to an assumed coexistence here, by the Danube, as suggested by the two final lines in the poem of Attila József sitting on the river bank: "And to settle at last our communal affairs / Remains our task and none too small it is".

