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**NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN SUPPORT OF  
EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGY FOR THE DANUBE REGION.  
THE CASE OF EUROPEAN INITIATIVES WITHOUT BORDERS.<sup>348</sup>**

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***Abstract:** The paper reviews the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region and discloses the added value of non-governmental organizations within its implementation. The data collection is based on desk research, literature review, the official website of the Strategy and the archives of the Bulgarian NGO European Initiatives without Borders. It is argued, that the concrete NGO under exploration could be characterised as one of the drivers of the emerging Danube region civil society.*

***Keywords:** European Union, macroregion, European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, civil society***JEL Codes: F53**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a world of ever-continuing globalization, problems and challenges are being addressed within international cooperation. Formats of such a cooperation are the transnational macroregions of the European Union (EU). One of them, the Danube region, is a focus of this paper.

In 2011 the EU Strategy of the Danube region was adopted to bring together 14 countries, thus covering an area of more than 112 million people, i.e. about one fifth of EU's population. It became a driver of a transnational cooperation, which relies mostly on the bottom-up approach and the method of **networking**. It involves national, regional and local political actors with the important contribution of civil society organizations, incl. academia. Thus, the macroregion is being transformed into a functional area, which implements policies, programs and projects, so that the goals of EU cohesion policy (in terms of overcoming social, economic and territorial disbalances and raising quality of life of EU citizens) could be met. On the other hand, the macro-regional strategy is complementary, it strengthens the regional policies of the relevant states. Further on, the practice of the macroregional strategy provides opportunities for neighbouring regions, e.g. the Western Balkans, on their way to europeanization (Kornazheva, 2019).

The purpose of this paper is to introduce a case of a network, mediated by *European Initiatives without Limits* NGO in support of two goals of the Danube Strategy, formulated as development of a *Knowledge society*, and *Investing in people and skills*. The network is a practice, which enhances the civil society of the region.

## **THE METHOD OF NETWORKING**

According to the widely recognized theory of Markus Schirmer<sup>349</sup>, a network is a set of objects, called **nodes**, that are connected by sorts of **ties**. The set may represent organizations or human beings, that have entered into particular relationships and maintain ties. In this case the set is known as a **social network**. The ties may be direct and indirect. **Direct ties** are those in which a

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<sup>349</sup> See Markus Schirmer's site/[http://www.markus-schirmer.com/background\\_networks.html](http://www.markus-schirmer.com/background_networks.html)

single link spans two nodes; **indirect ties** are connections between nodes, but only through other nodes.

It has been found out, that social networking depends on **three principles**: (1) reciprocity, the degree with which people do similar tasks for one another; (2) exchange, the degree with which people perform different tasks for one another; and (3) similarity, the degree of similarity between the nodes of the group (Carpenter, Bauer, Erdogan, 2010).

Social networks are characterized by **stability** (duration over time) and **direction of ties**, unidirectional or bidirectional. A unidirectional network allows information to travel in only one direction, and the bidirectional is capable of transmitting data in both directions, i.e. send and receive (Mieneke, 2004)

J. Travers and S. Milgram explored the **size** of social networks. Their research question was how many links might be necessary to transfer an envelope from one randomly chosen person to another randomly chosen person in the United States. They found that, on average, there were six links—or six degrees of separation—between any two people randomly drawn from the U.S. population (at the time) of 250 million, and estimated that each individual had a potential network of 3,000 to 10,000 people (Travers and Milgram, 1969).

Two more characteristics were pointed out by M. Carpenter, T. Bauer and B. Erdogan. The extent to which a given actor is at the core of the network is referred to as **centrality**. Centrality of the node means that he/she/the organization is in a position to acquire and control information, and to act as a broker between the network nodes. Another network characteristic is **density**. It is indicative of the number of people, that are connected directly to each other (Carpenter, Bauer, Erdogan, *ibid.*).

R. Cross, S. Borgatti and A. Parker have identified **five types of social networks**: (1) communication network, (2) information network, (3) problem-solving network, (4) knowledge network, and (5) access network. A communication network is an informal structure within which news and opinions are being discussed. An information network is built around a node with the potential to provide relevant information and advice on a particular topic. A problem-solving network brings together people, who are capable to solve problems and make decision. A knowledge network on a particular topic is a pool of persons of knowledge and skills. The access network is composed of gate-keepers, who control the access to the relevant competences, knowledge and expertise (Cross, Borgatti & Parker, 2002).

In his discussion on networks, Jason Owen-Smith<sup>350</sup> summerizes ten claims. Networks:

1. create social capital for individuals and communities;
2. create status and category differences in markets;
3. forms of organization are an alternative to markets and hierarchies;
4. are the defining feature of “innovative regions” such as Silicon Valley;
5. are the locus of innovation in high-technology industries;
6. create trust and increase forbearance;
7. inspire conformity in thought and action;
8. shape the diffusion of technologies and organizational practices;
9. create individual tastes and preferences;
10. ‘embed’ transactions in a social matrix, creating markets.

Further on, the author elaborates on the three effects of the functioning of the social networks:

- (1) “Network pipes”: they are resource and information channels of the society.
- (2) “Network prisms”: they are signals of status and provide public opinion leadership.
- (3) Network “peeps”: they are socially influential, identify and promote innovation.

The above presented aspects of the method of networking are relevant at regional level. **Networking is the main tool for the implementation of EU Strategy for the Danube Region.**

<sup>350</sup> See Jason Owen-Smith. Network theory. The Basics//<https://www.oecd.org/sti/inno/41858618.pdf>

Networks are being set up within the 4 pillars and 12 priority areas of the Strategy. They manage projects, which contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the relevant priority areas.

The next part of the paper will introduce the nodes, ties and the pattern of functioning of a **knowledge network**, which has been adding value to the implementation of the Strategy since 2016. For the purpose of this study it will be called *Danube Knowledge Network*.

## NODES OF DANUBE KNOWLEDGE NETWORK

The network is composed of three organizational nodes: Bulgarian-Romanian Interuniversity Europe Center - BRIE at University of Ruse (Bulgaria, Romania, Germany); European Danube Academy (Germany), and European Initiatives without Borders - EIWL (Bulgaria).

### BRIE at University of Ruse<sup>351</sup>

Bulgarian-Romanian Interuniversity Europe Center – BRIE was established in 2002 under the 1999 Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe within the initiative of the German Rectors' Conference and the leadership of Dr. Gerhard Duda. The host cities of the project, Ruse and Giurgiu, are located in the border area at the Bulgarian and the Romanian banks of the Danube and are connected by a bridge with check points. Along the river, they commute to ten European countries. The place is also a vivacious check point of east-west waterways and north-south continental routes. Here VII and IX pan-European transport corridors meet to connect Western Europe with the Black Sea region, and Northern Europe with the Aegean Sea and Turkey.

The two local universities, University of Ruse and the University of Economic Studies Bucharest cooperate with German partner universities. They have shaped the three-pillar identity of the cross-border structure: (1) to support European integration, regional stability and cross-border cooperation; (2) to develop *competences to cooperate* within master level studies; (3) to implement projects, which overcome challenges to regional and cross-border cooperation and open windows of opportunities. The institutions of BRIE encompass (1) Advisory Body, presided by Prof. Rita Süßmuth (President of German Bundestag 1988-1998) and involving stakeholders and partner universities, BRIE Board, including BRIE partner university rectors, BRIE directors and representatives of German Rectors' Conference (HRK), BRIE Commission (dealing with executive management). In 2005/6 an Intergovernmental Agreement in Support of BRIE, signed by Foreign Ministers Solomon Passi, Bulgaria, and Mihai Ungureanu, Romania, has entered into force, thus strengthening its institutionalization.

BRIE Ruse is a multifunctional structure. The profile of its activities is characterized by (1) a full-time four-semester master degree programme in European Studies, which was accredited in Germany, with more than 200 alumni from 16 countries, (2) extracurricular events (organization of summer schools in European integration in Brussels and Strasbourg, participation in Danube schools in Ulm, in International Academy *Is My Europe the Same as Yours* at the Bulgarian-Greek border, in seminars at the Romanian-Bulgarian border), (3) alumni network, (4) tailored study programmes, (5) public affairs aiming to counter border constraints, (6) research projects.

The first research project was a BRIE feasibility study and was developed from 2000 to 2002. It explored the local potential for cross-border cooperation and challenges to free movement across Bulgarian-Romanian border at the Danube bridge check points. The second project was implemented in 2007-2008 within the first EU CBC programme. Its acronym was BRIDGE: *BG-RO Initiative for Democracy as a Guard-post of Europe*. It brought together academic staff for a joint research and a study programme and addressed knowledge gaps of 18 Bulgarian and 18 Romanian border police servants with regard to EU accession, European values, cross-border cooperation and border control of the Schengen zone. From 2008 to 2013 the Erasmus Mundus educational project "External Cooperation Window for Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan" welcomed 15 students (8 – from Georgia, 6 from Azerbaijan and 1 from Armenia) from the region of South Caucasus, who were selected for studies at the European Studies master programme

<sup>351</sup> See Kornazheva, M. 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009.

and were granted scholarships. From 2011 to 2013 BRIE implemented the EU CBC research project BRAINS. It proposed an integrated identity and brand of the whole cross-border region, from a bottom-up survey-based perspective within the concept of RO-BUL-NA (ROmanian-BULgarian Neighbourhood Area).

In 2010 German Chacellor Angel Merkel was conferred the title Doctor Honoris Causa by the Rector of University of Ruse Prof. DTSc Hristo Beloiev, DHC mult., Academician of Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. In her speech she referred to BRIE a flagship project<sup>352</sup>.

### **European Danube Academy<sup>353</sup>**

On July 5th, 2008 in Ulm in the presence of Federal Minister Dr. Anette Schavan, former Vice Chancellor Dr. Erhard Busek, György Konrád and other representatives from politics and culture in the Danube countries *European Danube Academy (EDA)* was launched as a platform for political, cultural and scientific cooperation in the Danube region. In December 2010 EDA - initially a project of the Danube office and based in the House of Danube - became independent as a non-profit NGO. For more than eleven years of existence, the name of EDA has been associated with a large number of scientific and cultural events, readings, symposia, lectures and publications. They all promote: (1) international understanding, (2) cultural, scientific and democratic cooperation; (3) environmental and landscape protection; (4) development Assistance. The activities of EDA take place in colaboration with the cities of Ulm and Neu-Ulm, the actors of Danube Region Strategy of the European Union, the Council of Danube Cities and Regions and other partners.

The goals of EDA are (1) Advocating For #Prosperity #Democracy #Peace; (2) Promoting European Values #Basicrightsforall; (3) Raising Awareness on The Danube Region #Danyoube; (4) Cultural & Scientific Exchange #Buildingbridges; (5) Creating A Networking Platform #Makingfriends; (6) Educating Tomorrow's Decision Makers #Danubianleaders; (7) Initiating New (Economic) Projects #Innovations; (8) Counteracting the Brain Drain #Keepingpotential; (9) Publishing New Findings #Spreadingknowledge.

Since 2014, EDA has been organizing so-called Danube Schools, in which young people from all Danube countries apply to participate. Within the short study programs, they learn about Danube region problems and solutions, build friendships and partnerships and start projects together. The Danube Schools Series is a well-established and respected platform of exchange and debate among political decision makers, academics and students regarding the Danube region. It is managed by the EDA, the European Danube Academy in Ulm, Germany, in cooperation with a lot of universities and institutions from different cities along the Danube. The Danube Schools Series bring people together, provide them with expertise and give them the chance to build international networks. Participants gain knowledge on cultures, institutional structures and the complexity of the Danube region.

Indicative of the NGO activities are the publications Danube School Series:

- DIE DONAU SCHAFFT IDENTITÄT! THE DANUBE CREATES IDENTITY! BEITRÄGE DER DANUBE SUMMER SCHOOL ULM/NEU-ULM 2014, including texts from the project workshops of the Danube Schools 2014 and scientific contributions of their participants and referees;
- KOMPETENZENTWICKLUNG IM DONAURAUM INITIATIVE ZUR ERRICHTUNG DES STUDIENGANGS MASTER OF DANUBE REGION STUDIES – STELLENWERT UND WIRKUNG
- BRÜCKEN BILDEN! BRIDGES EDUCATE! ENTSTEHUNG UND ENTWICKLUNG DES DANUBE SCHOOL NETZWERKES, including texts from the project workshops of the Danube Schools 2016 and scientific contributions of their participants and referees.

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<sup>352</sup> Data collected from the website of BRIE: [www.brie.uni-ruse.bg](http://www.brie.uni-ruse.bg)

<sup>353</sup> See more about European Danube Academy on <https://www.donauakademie.eu/>

- ULM – NOVI SAD – BUDAPEST DIALOGUE ENTLANG DER DONAU, including texts from the project workshops of the Danube Schools 2017 and scientific contributions of their participants and referees.
- IMPULSE FÜR DEN DONAURAUM 10 JAHRE EUROPÄISCHE DONAU-AKADEMIE – 5 JAHRE DANUBE SCHOOLS
- CULTURAL TRANSFERS Kulturelle Vielfalt und Identität im Donauraum, including texts from the project workshops of the Danube Schools 2019 and scientific contributions of their participants and referees.<sup>354</sup>

### **European Initiatives Without Limits (EIWB)**

Founder of the NGO *European Initiatives Without Limits (EIWB)* is the author of this paper, and alumna of Bulgarian-Romanian Interuniversity Europe Center - BRIE at University of Ruse. Within the master degree in European Studies and Regional Cooperation I discovered a whole world of up-to-date knowledge, I learned how to cooperate and develop projects across borders. I had the chance to attend the Danube School, organized by European Danube Academy, EDA in Ulm. It added further value to my understanding of the potential of European cooperation. The cooperation I experienced turned out to be very stimulating. When I came back to Ruse, I initiated my NGO, strongly motivated to continue disseminating knowledge in non-routine formats, which fit the expectations of younger generations, including children.

In 2016, EIWB opened an innovative educational platform with research workshops for young “scientists”. Children over 7 years old, did scientific experiments in physics and chemistry, handling the materials themselves. The instructions were presented as rules of a game and they boldly rushed to experiment. No less interesting was the "Game of Codes", through which children learned what programming is and started to construct robots.

Another innovation of EIWB was the financial workshops for children aged 8 to 16. The program included 20 thematic classes. The children embarked on an incredible adventure to explore the nature and role of money. The economy and business became clear, accessible, understandable, because of the exciting stories, comics, fairy tales, illustrations and photos.

In 2017/8, the idea for the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Mathematics) Digital Resource Center project was born. It offers video tutorials for students aged 7 to 14 in the field of science and art, which are applicable in both home and school environments. The educational methodology combines practical experience and game fun. In 2019, the project became the big winner in the fifth anniversary edition of the Academy "Innovation in Action". The president of EIWB was awarded a scholarship to participate in the summer program of the Solvay Brussels School of Economics and Management.

Since 2016 I have been maintaining relations both with BRIE and EDA. I was aware, that in 2011, when the EU Strategy for the Danube Region was launched, the two academic institutions have met to discuss a joint introduction of a master programme in Danube Studies. The idea was agreed, but the implementation was postponed. It was decided, that a Danube summer school could be a relevant format of cooperation. Having been part of the Danube school programme in 2016, I had the motivation and the courage to offer the technical support of EIWB to the director of BRIE and the rector of University of Ruse, so that the ties with EDA could be revitalized and strengthened. Within several brainstormings in BRIE, the idea of a three-lateral conference-based Danube Knowledge Network was born. The aim was to involve bachelor, master and PhD students in research on topics related to European cooperation in the Danube region. The role of a research projects initiator and a scientific supervisor was taken by the director of BRIE, assoc.prof. Mimi Kornazheva, PhD. EIWB was positioned in the center of the network, dealing with maintenance of the ties, both with EDA and BRIE. In 2017 the first conference project application was submitted.

### **THE CONFERENCE PATTERN OF FUNCTIONING OF THE NETWORK**

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<sup>354</sup>See more about Danube School Series// <https://www.danubeschools.eu/>

**HOPE: 2018 conference**

On 1 November 2018, HOPE conference, hosted by BRIE, brought together 40 academics, post-doctoral and PhD students, master degree holders and bachelor level students from six countries (Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Cameroon). It marks the 25th anniversary of the entry into force of the Treaty on European Union on 1 November 1993. The project was supported by University of Ruse, Baden Württemberg Foundation, European Danube Academy, European Initiatives without Limits NGO and Ruse Free City Foundation. HOPE was focused on four topics and stands for *Harnessing Regions' strengths; Overcoming weaknesses of states; Proactively responding to global threats and opportunities; Elaborating Future Policy Priorities*.

In his greeting speech the Rector of University of Ruse, Prof. DTSc Hristo Beloev, DHC mult. emphasized the fact, that in the beginning of the 1990s the University was the first in Bulgaria to provide an academic environment for programmes in European Studies. HOPE conference, he said, is an evidence of the ever growing potential of BRIE to enable young people in their strive to cooperate across borders and to develop and implement their research ideas.

The conference was opened by assoc. prof. M. Kornazheva, PhD, director of BRIE. She elaborated on the questions *Why we hope? What we hope for?* by focusing on the history of EU as an evolving political and economic crisis management capacity, and as a resilient political and economic environment, which has secured peace, freedoms and well-being of European citizens. Referring to the four conference topics, she emphasized, that united Europe is stronger with stronger regions. So, we may hope, that Eastern European regions will catch up faster with the Western ones. Then, she pointed out, that Eastern European member states are vulnerable in terms of their young democracies, which fail to cope with corruption and the legacy of the totalitarian regimes. So, we may hope, that EU will become more decisive and will address these issues. She elaborated on global threats, that EU has been facing, such as terrorism, climate change, unprecedented immigration flows. So, we may hope, that EU would take the role of a proactive decision maker with capacities to impact the solution of global problems and to open windows of opportunities. Finally, she discussed EU policy priorities in terms of the needs of young generations. So, we may hope, she concluded, that young people would be enabled to have a stronger voice, when it comes to shaping the future of Europe.

Speakers and topics:

**Panel 1**

**Harnessing Regions' Strengths**

Gruber, B. Germany. *The Added Value of Regionalism to the European Idea*

Tsenova, B. and T. Reisser. Bulgaria/Germany. *EU Danube Region Strategy as a Driver of Change. The Case of the Danube School*

Karapchanski, S. Bulgaria. *A Danubean 'Capital' in the Urban Dimension of EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020: The Sustainable Development of Ruse*

Markova, I. Bulgaria. *City and Regional Branding in the Danube Region as an Opportunity and a Challenge*

Petrov, Y. Bulgaria. *Potential of Ruse and Giurgiu as Danubean and Cross-Border Cooperation Cities*

Alipiev, A. Bulgaria. *EU Regionalism as a Driver of Democratization/Decentralization in Member States*

**Panel 2**

**Overcoming States' Weaknesses**

Stancheva, B. Bulgaria. *Liberal Democracy Deficits at National Level as Viewed from EU Perspective*

Parvanova, E. Bulgaria. *Is European Separatism a Result of a Weakness of the Union or of the State?*

Sokolova, H. Bulgaria. *Practices of Success as States' Weaknesses. Cross-Cultural Analysis of Findings about Bulgaria and Hungary*

Petkova, G. Bulgaria. *Abandoning Bulgaria – Reasons Why and Consequences*

Nikolov, M. Bulgaria. *The EU Demographic Crisis: Is the Welfare State Fading Away?*

Veysalova, E. Bulgaria. *EU Multi-level Governance of Diversity: The Case of Turkish Minority in Bulgaria*

### **Panel 3**

#### **Proactively Responding to Global Threats and Opportunities**

Kirova, S. Bulgaria. *In Search for a Synergy Effect: Towards Bridging the Danube Region Strategy with EU Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement*

Kyosya, M. Moldova. *EU – Moldova Relations: Is Stability Feasible at a Turbulent Eastern Border?*

Venelinova, N. Bulgaria. *The Global Threat of Fake, Furious and Favourable News and the EU Policy Responses*

Imbia, D. Cameroon. *EU Policy Responses to Immigration Pressure since 2014*

Yemelianova, A. Ukraine. *Ukraine between Russia and EU: Challenges of the Legacy and Opportunities of the Association Agreement*

Elimbi, C. Cameroon. *EU as a Model for the Integration of African Countries*

### **Panel 4**

#### **Elaborating Future Policy Priorities**

N. Venelinova. Bulgaria. *Towards a Proactive Security Cooperation Framework. (Comparative Study of Global, European and National Security Related Strategic Documents)*

Delchev, A. Bulgaria. *Towards Smart Borders: Policy Prospects and Bottlenecks as Viewed at a Danube Bridge Check Point*

Radu, A. Romania. *Towards a Single Digital Voice of European Union*

Dimitrova, M. Bulgaria. *The Court of EU as a Policy Maker: Analysis of Judgments on Immigration Cases.*

Parvanova, E. and M. Kornazheva, Bulgaria. *The Young Generation in European Politics: Beneficiaries or Policy Makers?*

### **TURNing Point, 2019 Conference**

In 2019 BRIE proposed a conference entitled *Turning Point*. Here follows the project rationale, as devised by assoc. prof. Kornazheva.

At the **TURN** of the century, on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1999 the Foreign Ministers of the Member States of the European Union, the European Commission, the Foreign Ministers of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, the Russian Federation, Slovenia, the then former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, the United States of America, the OSCE Chairman in Office and the Representative of the Council of Europe, the Foreign Ministers of Canada and Japan, representatives of the United Nations, UNHCR, NATO, OECD, WEU, International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development have responded to the European Union's call to adopt a Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (SPSEE), and thus to support the **TURN** of the region towards European values and norms, and prospective EU membership.

On the **TURN** of 2014-2019 EU policy cycle, in 2018 the European Commission adopted a Strategy for the credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans countries confirming the European future of the region as a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values. This strategy is a **turning point** of the EU five-year enlargement break, a decision made in 2014 in a context of enlargement fatigue, legacy of the financial crisis of 2008, Arab spring at the EU's southern borders since 2010, and 2013 Ukraine crisis at its eastern borders. The new Strategy clearly states, that the EU door is opened to further accessions when the individual countries have met the criteria. It depicts the priorities and areas of reinforced cooperation. Progress along the European path is an objective and merit-based process which depends on the concrete results achieved by each individual country.

One of the sustainable projects of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe is BRIE – Bulgarian-Romanian Interuniversity Europe Center. Therefore, BRIE is to provide a platform for a discussion on the region of Western Balkans focusing on the TURNing point:

Towards EU membership  
Unlocking the administrative potential  
Reasserting democratic political order  
Nourishing peaceful and secure societies

The territory of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region overlaps partly with Western Balkans countries – Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, the conference addresses both regions in search for synergy effects.

The 2019 conference brought together 25 participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Vietnam, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine. It was supported by University of Ruse, European Danube Academy, Ulm and the Ministry of Science, Research and Arts of Baden-Württemberg, as well as the NGO *European Initiatives Without Limits*.

**Speakers and topics:**

Corr. mem. prof. Hristo Beloev, DSc, Rector of University of Ruse, Bulgaria:  
*BRIE Sustainability as a Legacy of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe*

Assoc. prof. Mimi Kornazheva, PhD, University of Ruse, Bulgaria:  
*From European Perspective to EU Membership: Are Western Balkans Approaching the Turning Point?*

Assoc. prof. Emanuil Kolarov, PhD, University of Ruse, Bulgaria:  
*Comparative Public Administration of Western Balkans Countries*

Prof. Claudia Popescu, PhD, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania: *Cross-border Cooperation at the Romanian-Bulgarian Border: Lessons for Western Balkans Public Administration*

Panayotopulu Vassiliki, Greece:  
*European Parliament Elections of 2019 Highlights: European Political Parties and Movements Seeking for More Integration and Unity*

Dekova Maria, Bulgaria:  
*Alternatives to the European Perspective of Western Balkans: Global Actorness of China*  
Nagy Attila, Serbia:

*How could EU Strategy for the Danube Region Support Reconciliation of Serbia and Kosovo*  
Isovic Emir, Bosnia and Herzegovina:

*Added Value of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Cultural Heritage of the Danube Region*  
Draghia Dan, Romania:

*The future of Western Balkans as EU Member States: Points of View from Romania*  
Țuțuianu Miruna-Constantina, PhD student, Romania:

*Potential Contribution of Romania to the Energy Security of the Danube Region*  
Blagovesta Tsenova, Workshop trainer, Bulgaria: *Potential Projects of EU Strategy for the Danube Region in Support of Western Balkans Progress towards EU Membership*

**DIVERS: 2021 conference**

On 5-6<sup>th</sup> June, 2021 BRIE hosted conference DIVERS, **D**anubean **I**nclusive, **V**alue-based, **E**mpathetic and **R**esponsive **S**ociety on the grounds of a research project, proposed by the director of BRIE, assoc. prof. M. Kornazheva. It was supported by University of Ruse, European Danube Academy, NGO European Initiatives without limits. Thirty bachelor, master and PhD students and young professionals from Romania, Ukraine, Serbia, India and Bulgaria attended the event. About 100 high school students joined different sessions of the two-day programme.

Raison d'Être of the project focused on the fact, that in 2020, the 115<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nobel Prize laureate Elias Canetti was commemorated under the auspices of the Ruse-located Elias Canetti International Society. Conference DIVERS commemorates 1981, the year when the Prize was awarded. Elias Canetti was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature 40 years ago for “writings marked by a broad outlook, a wealth of ideas and artistic power.” When the world press reported



on the writer's award, the New York Times noted that he was the first Bulgarian-born writer to win a Nobel Prize. But actually, his identity is associated rather with his birthplace - Ruse (then Ruschuk), a 23-century old settlement, located along the Danube. For the rest of his life, he often returned to his childhood memories. In *The Tongue Set Free* (1977), he wrote about his hometown: "Every day you could hear seven or eight languages. There were Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks, Albanians, Armenians and Gypsies, along with two groups of Jews who hated each other heartily - the Sephardim, who spoke Ladino, which is a kind of archaic Spanish, and the Ashkenazi." Elias was the oldest of three sons in a family of Spanish Jews and belonged to a minority among minorities. The cultural diversity, he was exposed to, impacted his later insights about the diverse nature of human mind and the existence of "irrational" biases in human cognition. He grew up a polyglot and a student of world cultures, incl. nations and groups that received little or no attention.

Canetti's writings reveal his multilingual beginnings and his life experience of a great variety of influences, within which he realizes, that what people abhor most is the alien touch. In his book *Crowds and Power*, he discloses himself as a political philosopher. Canetti warns, that fear of alien touch is similar to the fear of death, it is an expression of primitiveness, and it does not allow the human being to see anything but forces of darkness and evil. He first wrote on the subject in 1935, just two years after Hitler came to power. World events have made everyone feel responsible, he said.

Today we feel responsible, too, points out assoc.prof. Kornazheva. Cultural, ethnic and religious diversity in Europe of the post-migration crisis is challenged anew by the fear of the alien touch. Academics can resist by providing knowledge. Therefore, the contributors to project DIVERS study and share with the other participants peaceful co-existence of cultural minorities in the city of Ruse. The sessions' speakers, the workshop and the extracurricular programme deliver messages of unbiased, unjaundiced and open-minded outlooks towards historical Otherness along the Danube. Such a discourse adds value to the social construction of a Danubean Inclusive, Value-based, Empathetic and Responsive Society. Such a society acknowledges the culturally diverse human potential as a background of a commonly shared past and as a catalyst of a commonly constructed sustainable future.

**Speakers and topics:**

Prof. Penka Angelova, DSc, President of Elias Canetti International Society, Bulgaria: *The Legacy of Elias Canetti*

Corr. mem. prof. Hristo Beloev, DSc, Rector of University of Ruse and President of BRIE Board: *Hosting Cultural Diversity: The Case of BRIE*

Prof. Dr. Krassimir Martev, Director of International Students Department, University of Ruse: *Hosting Cultural Diversity: The Case of University of Ruse*

Assoc. prof. Mimi Kornazheva, PhD, Director of BRIE, University of Ruse: *United in Diversity: EU Cultural Minorities and Governance of Language Policies*

Eva Parvanova, PhD and BRIE alumna, University of Ruse: *Cultural Minorities and Separatism*

Andreea Radu, PhD and BRIE alumna from Romania: *Cultural minorities along the Danube*

Viktor Kirilov, BRIE alumnus, PhD student, University of Ruse: *Ruse – a Culturally Diverse City: The Case of the Jewish Community*

Ashkhen Minasyan, BRIE alumna from Armenia: *Ruse – a Culturally Diverse City: The Case of the Armenian Community*

Essin Veysalova, BRIE alumna, PhD student, University of Ruse: *Ruse – a Culturally Diverse City: The Case of the Turkish Community*

Marin Nikolov, BRIE alumnus, PhD student, University of Ruse: *Ruse – a Culturally Diverse City: The Case of the Roma Community*

Yordan Petrov, BRIE alumnus, PhD student, University of Ruse: *Ruse in EU – Harnessing Diversity and Financing for Regional Development*

Vanya Georgieva, PhD student, University of Ruse: *Attitudes of Bulgarians to Otherness. 2019-2020 Study Results*

A role-playing game *If I Were in Your Shoes* was created by the theatre troupe *Vizhna* to involve conference participants in real life encounters between culturally diverse people.

The conference offered a session with the special participation of His Excellency Christoph Eichhorn, Ambassador of Germany to Bulgaria on the topic: *Same bed- different dreams? A Ferman-Bulgarian Discussion on Europe*.

Cultural program was tailored according to the conference topic. Visits to the Ruse sights of the Jewish club Shalom, the Armenian church, and Said Pasha mosque.

## CONCLUSION

Since 2016, the year when the idea was born, a **Danube Knowledge Network** has been adding value to the implementation of the EU Strategy of the Danube Region, and more particularly to priority areas 7 and 9.

On the grounds of the theoretical references at the beginning of the paper, one may claim, that the Network under exploration is based on the three principles, i.e. **reciprocity, exchange, and similarity**. BRIE, EDA and EIWB perform similar tasks to each other – they deliver knowledge on European integration and Danube-related topics. Secondly, they exchange this knowledge, the research findings being published in the Danube school series. Thirdly, the three nodes of the network are similar, they share the common commitment to knowledge and education.

The node of EIWB occupies the **central position** voluntarily.

The network is **bidirectional**, it is based on two-way communication. EIWB provides and receives relevant information and mediates the coordination between BRIE and EDA on conference research project application, development and implementation.

Danube Knowledge Network is characterized by **stability**. It has been functioning for 5 years, a period in which the foundation of a sustainable cooperation has been steadily laid.

As far as the **size** is concerned, it involves about 150 conference participants so far, 40 of them being active as conference speakers. The size of the network is to grow.

The network can be characterized as a **network pipe**. It is a resource and information channel of the emerging Danube region civil society.

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