Studying Disconnectedness:

Postsocialist ‘Liberated’ Informal Economies and Ideas of European Unity.
A Bottom-up Look from the Lower Danube (Bulgarian North-west)

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Abstract

Northwestern Bulgaria ranks as the poorest of EU regions despite natural advantages: fertile land in the Lower Danube. Land and river have been instrumental in the spread of agriculture to Europe in pre-historic times. In Roman history, the region had a key significance. The ‘canalization’ of the Danube, connecting through the Rhein-Main-Danube Canal the North with the Black Sea, was expected to boost economies in the Lower Danube and bring about an enhanced sense of connectedness in the Union.

The article asks why this has not happened. Longitudinal ethnographic research (since 1976, ongoing) in a part of the Bulgarian NW suggests that connectedness with other European regions can be seen mainly as extensions of informal-to-criminal economic activities from East to West. River cargo transportation is asymmetrically looking in opposite directions, with the greater part concentrated in the western parts of the system. An increased volume of tourist cruising bypasses most of the Lower Danube due to infrastructural backwardness. A sense of positive connectedness, insofar as the river’s role is concerned, can be seen only in non-economically motivated individual or collective pursuits, like recreational international canoeing and a rising environmental consciousness among grassroots actors. It is concluded that while a waterway can serve political projects premised on unifying values and benefits, they remain, at best, only as proclamations as the case of the Bulgarian North-west illustrates. At their worst, they serve as a cover-up for proliferation of ‘liberated’ socio-economies of post-socialism. A more stable sense of unity can be seen at present only by little seen spontaneous grassroots’ movements premised on environmental concerns and an underlying wholeness-of-nature ethos.

Key words: disconnectedness, postsocialism, informal socio-economies, EU regions, Northwestern Bulgaria, Lower Danube, European Danube Strategy, environment.

1. Background
According to the EU statistical bulletin EUROSTAT, the Bulgarian North West ranks as the poorest region in the Union (Severozapadna 2017). The ranking is based on per capita buying capacity. The region’s is 29% of the average for the EU, next up – rather surprisingly - being

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Maillot in France (31%), the South Central and North Central Regions, again in Bulgaria, with 33%, and the North East in Romania with 34%. At the leaders’ end, stands London’s Central West (588%), after it Luxemburg (266%), Hamburg (206%), Brussels (205%), and Bratislava (188%).

The ranking gives an idea of the tension, which one may expect to build up in the regions at the bottom of the list. ‘Tension’ I use following Alexander Gershenkron’s seminal work on backward economies (1962). As summarized by Fishlow, Gershenkron’s first hypothesis was that:

‘Relative backwardness creates a tension between the promise of economic development, as achieved elsewhere, and the continuity of stagnation. Such a tension takes political form and motivates institutional innovation, whose product becomes appropriate substitution for the absent preconditions for growth.’ (Fishlow 2001, emphases mine).

It will be remembered here that Gershenkron’s study of what he called ‘backward economies’ included, together with that of Russia/Soviet Union and Italy, also Bulgarian development between liberation from Ottoman rule (1878) and the pre-war 1939 (Gershenkron 1962:198-235). *Institutional changes* that the tension was supposed to trigger, in accordance with the hypothesis above, were that appropriate measures would be applied so that agricultural produce found its way into local industrial production, diminishing the country’s dependence on imported manufactured goods.

Concerning the North-western part of the country (henceforth: the Bulgarian NW, or just NW) the judgement looks particularly valid. Here is one of the richest alluvial plains in Europe, or *Moesia Inferior* (Lower Mizia), as it was known in Roman times.

**The Roman Interlude (1-4 cc. AD)** The Roman presence in what is today Bulgaria is important for the story I want to tell. As a historic contrast, it highlights the significant place the Lower Danube lands had in imperial strategy – a feature strikingly absent today as regards both national and EU strategic thinking. The latifundian land-holdings, their villas and prospering towns, demanded defence against incursions across the Danube (Tomas 2007; Filov 1903). In response, Roman attention was persistently and determinately focussed on defending this rich area. According to Karavas (2001),

‘The Lower Danube was one of the most heavily fortified sector of the Roman empire, despite the fact that it corresponded to what was essentially a small fraction of the total length of the imperial frontiers. The frontier line alone is marked by no less than c. 180 fortifications (…).
This area also constituted a key theatre of war during the principate, which brought together an extraordinary number of troops in relation to the rest of the empire: 25-30% of the total forces of the Roman army, i.e. c. 110,000 men.’ (Karavas 2001: 5)

Jumping abruptly to the present day, there is a second reason the Roman preoccupation with the frontier has for my story. It concerns the living link with those 110,000 men and the settlements that grew around their fortified camps. This link is vestigial: today’s treasure hunting, mostly for Roman coins of various periods, but also for bigger artefacts. The occupation provides much needed income for impoverished villagers along the Bulgarian bank of the river, the greater part of profits going to intermediaries and major antique traders. I will return to this echo of ancient times later on.

A third reason is the resemblance latifundian landholdings bear to the agri-business of scale today, or that of the ‘agri-millionaires’ (Bg. slang: agromillioneri). My empirical data comes from a stretch of the Danube bank and its hinterland, which I anonymize. Let’s call its central village Zhelezarovo. At some five kilometres from it, one sees the silos, trucks, mansion, and ‘guest-house’ of the local agri-millionaire Stoevski (fictitious name). Local villagers decline to talk about him, or do so whispering. A powerful person, known to be involved in various criminal activities, and finally in prison in a foreign country. According to local rumour, his estate of about 5,000 ha is managed by his father and sister.

To return to the point I want to highlight by historical references: of the significance of the Lower Danube region in European history and the contrast with the present day.

Pre-history and the agricultural diaspora Looking at the pre-historic record, the region was part of the long journey of settled agriculture from Mesopotamia to what is now Central and Western Europe. This long and complex travel, via the Aegian and up into today’s SE Europe, and then swerving west, very probably made use of the Danube. (Gheorghiu, 2008; Pinhasi et al. 2005)

The Roman presence in the region is a late and a very small part in this civilizational accomplishment, happening over thousands of years. The side of it I focus on takes further than the given fact of a rich alluvial plain, where loess thickness can reach nearly 100 m in depth. Or, as one of the villagers in my field-site quoted a local adage: ‘(Even) if you plant a wooden sandal (nalum), it will grow here.’

This richness of the Danubean lands, exploited since Neolithic times, and the spread of agriculture making use of it, motivates a search for connectedness of European lands through a foundational narrative. The presence of a physical feature – like the big European rivers
Danube, Rhein, Elbe, Visla - amplifies the force of such a narrative. A further sense of a united whole comes from manmade intervention: that of removing natural obstacles standing in the way of unifying water. In grand engineering vision, born already in Roman times, this unity through uninterrupted waterways was seen as transecting mountains to connect vast watersheds, and through them - seas on opposite sides of the continent. This idea of attaining connectedness by making artificial rivers – canals – suggests a wish for overcoming or *transcending* natural obstacles, of bending Nature in a desired way. It also develops the narrative in a technological direction. This is of canalization as an engineering feat, which is capable of realizing and sustaining various imagined unities as political projects. (Cf. Schot 2011; Misa and Schot 2005, in Janáč 2012:16)

Janáč’s book (2012), tells the story of a long dreamt of, but still unfinished project: that of building a canal to join the Danube with Oder and Elbe and thus connect the Black and Baltic Seas. Two main points of this important book deserve special mention. One is of ‘canalization’ as a vehicle for creation of politically engendered unities. A principal motive here is of waterways as instruments of connectedness of metropolitan centres with their peripheries. His examples include, in historical succession, the invention of *Mitteleuropa* (*‘Middle’, i.e. Central Europe*) at the turn of the 19th c., later a Nazi inspired *Grossraum*, then Sovietization by connecting the Rhein with Volga, and, finally, the EU grand project of the Rhein-Main-Danube connectedness, attempting the most recent of such projects.

This last imagined connectedness, as all preceding it, calls for examining the way connectedness-thinking seems to go. It may very well be that the idea of connectedness – or unity itself - is a metaphorical reflection of the humanly perceived smooth wholeness of water. This may be contrasted to the perception of laborious walking on earth in contrast to easy (in economic terms: ‘cheap’) floating on water. The glide contrasts with friction, suggesting participation in indivisibility.² As Humboldt wrote in a letter from his South American travels on the Orinoco: ‘water is the element of motion, not the earth’ (Wulf 2015:1000). From here a smooth, floating passage, untroubled by the obstacles, stops, and interruptions of the roughness of earth. The depth of the metaphor may be of thousands of years, preserving the awe and fear of European forests and mountains, associating travel with danger until very late. (Boyadzhiev 2011; Braudel 1995; Le Goff 1964) Of the times, in other words, when rivers offered what roads are doing now.

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² Of the foundational role of metaphors cf. Lakoff and Johnson’s classic (1980).
The possibility of waterway travel and transportation of goods, and, more than that: of ideas – like the case of the Neolithic agricultural diaspora – seems to extend the image of unity from ideological connectedness to the more practical one of prosperity. This mantrical dictum (‘connectedness is prosperity’) can be seen as the foundational and legitimizing myth of ‘canalization’.

A second main point of Janáč’s book can be summed up in this way: when arguments prevail that connectedness may, after all, not work – neither politically, nor economically (‘connectedness isn’t prosperity’) – what keeps the idea going is the fascination of waterway engineering. The passion for connecting, in other words, can be an art-for-art’s sake exercise, with canals as a medium of artistic – or poetic - expression on a grand scale. The current state of the Lower Danube – as part of a fulfilled dream - that of connecting the seas on the two opposite sides of the continent, speaks very much in favour of the poetic prevailing over the pragmatic. The sight of boats gliding on water moves more, one could say, than wheeled vehicles on asphalt.

**Boundaries**  Another angle, from which the connectedness of the riverine ‘ribbon’\(^3\) can be viewed, is one of drawing the outer limit of a tightly road-connected unity. This was much the case of the Romans, when the expansion of the Empire *sine fine* became, for a time, a doctrine of the past. As it is well known, Augustus’ final will was for his successors ‘to halt any attempts at further advance and to establish the limits of Roman control behind clearly defined natural barriers. (The words) were clear and irrevocable: ”*consilium coercendi intra terminos imperii*” (Karavas 2001:1). The admonition was disregarded only after expansion across the Lower Danube and the conquering of Dacia under Trajan seemed the only possible way to block further danger from the North. (Gudea 1979:1)

Rivers can be media for expressing a political project of ‘bringing together’, of creating wholeness (unity, connectedness, cohesion, integration, region, synergy). At the same time, they can also be ones for ‘setting apart’ by rounding off ‘own’ space, and separating it from the ‘alien’ by using the river’s capacity of a natural obstacle. Water is thus exploited in its potential for ambiguity: as an element of motion, of easily (‘cheaply’) getting from one point to another, hence the inward (metropolitan) looking perspective of connectedness. And, simultaneously, of instability and danger - one can drown in it, hence the capacity of being a natural obstacle, of disconnectedness, and an apprehensive look outwards.

\(^3\) The metaphor is from Ágh et al. (2010): ‘Europeanization of the Danube Region: The Blue Ribbon Project’. 
Space can, in this way, be ordered into place (cf. Feld and Basso 1996) on a grand scale by using water as a metaphor of connectedness and the creation of imagined wholes, of places oriented around a foundational centre. As also of limiting them off from other such. These are simultaneous notions, borne of an essential ambiguity of the just-firm-enough element. Depending on human states-of-affairs, one or the other may come into prominence. As it is now, in the case of the European Union and what is known as a European Danube Strategy (Coroban 2011; Ágh 2010; Ágh et al. 2010), the overarching trope is one of keeping together. Interconnectedness is imagined with an unspoken West European centre of gravity and a pronounced sense of peripherality as one looks, in particular, in the direction of the Lower Danube. Recent talk of multi-speed Europe can be seen as a euphemistic veiling over of such an image.

The issue, which I place as central in this paper, is concerned with the historic dynamic and current state of connectedness. The question is, in this light, about what makes – or unmakes – a geographical space into a place, the latter invested with a social, political, and economic sense of unity – or ‘idea of region’ (Breslin and Higgott 2000:337f). In the case of the Bulgarian NW, the relevant ‘idea’ is that of belonging to a ‘Danube Region’.

Writing during the months of the still very raw Brexit drama, I will steer away from the much bigger issue of the ‘idea of union’. A discussion of the rich literature on that and the problematic nature of ‘European identity’ (i.e. Stråth 2002), or of ‘othering’ of the ‘near Other’ (cf. Todorova 2005), is beyond the ambitions of this short text. I can only point out that the problematic state of Danubean regionalism can be seen in the context of this much bigger problem – i.e. of the ideological nature of the quest for an elusive European identity. (Lähdesmäki 2012; Mayer and Palmowski 2004; Stråth 2002) A brief look at the European Danube Strategy (EDS) – as an expression of this problematic quest - becomes necessary at this point.

The EDS has been conceived in an atmosphere of enthusiasm for creating European macro-regions, characteristic of the past decade. In that, it followed a well-trodden path of

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4 Officially: European Union Strategy for the Danube Region. (Coroban 2011)
5 A similar phenomenon characterized the Northernmost part of Europe. The enthusiasms of the 1990s culminated in the Norwegian-inspired Barents Region, setting off what a prominent researcher has called ‘a Barents Euphoria’ (Hønneland 2003). This North European vision of connectedness with NW Russia was invested with hopes for regional economic boom (Seppänen 1995). Twenty years on from those heady times, all of this is turning into distant memory.
previous mega-projects, whether their visionary sources had been in the West or, during the Soviet era and as regards the countries of the Soviet Bloc – in the East.

In specific terms, the question I ask is about the pronounced sense of disconnectedness between the region of this study (the Bulgarian NW), and the western EU parts from where the latest version of a connecting vision has arrived. As said at the beginning, the regions, symbolizing and physically seating the vision of connectedness or unity, and the one I look at from a grassroots’ perspective mark an extreme in disparity. (Cf. Dieringer et al. 2010) Otherwise, the image of unity rests on the physical connectedness of three major European rivers (Rhein, Main, Danube) through canalization. In a more abstract sense, as suggested above, this particular imagery is sustained by sometimes overlapping, at others - disjointed forces. One rests on the metaphorical power of water to resemble unity – a primeval notion, resting on the indivisibility of the element. Another comes from a quest of the transcendental: to get beyond reality (by connecting rivers). A third provides a materialistic legitimation of the transcendentalist romantic wish by proclaiming connectedness as prosperity.

It was shown above how rivers ‘worked’ in pre-historic and later times as physical features exploitable for attaining pragmatic goals (routes, boundaries) and, increasingly, for defining imagined unities. I turn now to the case of the poorest region in Europe, which poses the question: why it can be so, that nothing of the above works?

2. The Bulgarian NW: a look from below

‘Agri-millionaires’ The look I take is from a location on the riverine side of this region. Looking to the south of my camp on the bank, there is a row of terraces, rising until the great Mizian plain is reached. The Village of Zhelezarovo sits on its edge, facing north and the river. On its opposite, southern side, the Mizian Plain stretches all the way to the horizon and the barely seen ridge of the Balkan Mountains.

The Plain is a vista of agricultural cultivation on a grand scale. A photo of a field of rape could have been taken anywhere in the prosperous parts of Europe. Some five kilometres to the south of Zhelezarovo, there is the cluster of silos, trucks, and premises, mentioned before.

Zhelezarovo, by sharp contrast, has a desolate look. The impact of flight to cities can be seen everywhere. Obituary notices (nekrolozi), decorated with dry funerary wreaths, are taped on gate after gate. The windows of the houses are pasted over with old newspapers in lieu of curtains – the ubiquitous sign of life gone from them.
Until the changes of 1989, Zhelezarovo used to be the central village of a state farm of scale: Agro-industrial Complex ‘Zhelezarovo’ (APK “Zhelezarovo”). It used to cultivate the land that is now controlled by the ‘agri-millionaire’ with the silos, machinery, mansion and endless fields, i.e. the already mentioned Stoevski, in his present state of an absentee landlord behind bars.

The desolate vineyards

A closer look at recent events can be gained from the series of loess undulations, lying between the fields on the Mizian Plateau and the bank of the Danube. This rectangular piece of fertile land, stretching along the river for some five kilometres, with another two in depth, is the drop of water in which the local story is told. This needs going into some detail, as many strands intersect here.

One way to unravel them is by personal history. The first time I saw the place was from a canoe, back in 1976. From water level, the first loess terrace above a thin line of sand and pebble beach revealed neat rows of peach and apricot trees. The extensive rectangular plot was an orchard, cultivated, as I learned later, by APK “Zhelezarovo”.

In between the orchard on the riverside, and the rising slope of the Mizian Plain rim above, one could see several lines of vineyard plots, interspersed with dense wild groves. As the years went by, and my ties with local people grew, I learned that the vineyards were ‘private’ plots of the villagers. Rather, plots for ‘personal use’ (za lichno polzvane): a practice, well established during the Socialist period. Land which was difficult to cultivate by big state farm machinery, was given for use to local villagers in plots of up to two decars\(^6\). Due to the richness of the soil and availability of water for irrigation, the miniature plots were abundantly fruitful. Their greater part presented neat rows of vines hung on wires, the latter fixed at three metre intervals on reinforced-concrete poles. In between the rows and on the sides, there grew fruit-trees. Facing a connecting cart-road, there would be a cabin with a well, and flower and vegetable patches on the sides.

For the vineyard-tenders, the river was a place for some net-fishing and an occasional outing with families from town. Sons and daughters had long resettled to the nearest bigger cities offering jobs – to Mikhailovgrad (now Montana), to Pleven, or ideally – to the capital city of Sofia. The river for them was an additional motive to visit parents. It also offered an opportunity for an angling holiday and sentimental journeys back to a village childhood.

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\(^6\) The usual unit of land measure in Bulgaria, equalling roughly one fourth of an acre.
A more utilitarian connection with the river was through the chance of catching eight-metre long pine-tree logs. These would float by after each unloading of Soviet (Ukrainian) timber-laden push-boat convoys at the Port of Lom, some twenty kilometres upriver. Logs would fall off from time to time from the jaws of the unloading cranes. As valuable building material in those times of shortage, the ubiquitous defitsit, they were eagerly awaited, and, with luck, caught by boat.

The state farm orchards provided another link with the outside world – this time westwards. A great part of the produce was exported to West Germany, the state gaining much sought hard currency that way. The river was not a medium of transportation for the produce, however. International transport was by a growing fleet of heavy-duty long-distance trucks. The competition it offered as regarded perishable peaches and apricots, was no match for the slow-moving barge convoys.

The benefit of fruit-export to Western Europe came to Zhelezarovo only in an oblique way. The Socialist state system appropriated currency inflows high above the heads of the villagers who ensured them. Still, a top-down redistributive chain would allow, eventually, something for the village. In the main, that was state support for APK “Zhelezarovo” to continue its economically problem-ridden existence. That, in its turn, provided the chance of villagers to top up meagre salaries with all the co-operative could give by various forms of informal income. Much of this could be pilfering – pure and simple. One could hear trucks, sidecar bikes, and donkey carts rumble or clatter through the orchards all through the night. ‘Institutionalized theft’ (Creed 1998), or a ‘private-in-the-collective’ (sovkhoist) socio-economy (Konstantinov 2015; 2002), was a serious factor in sustaining the village. This happened in an extended family linkage with offspring in towns, kin and para-kin networks, and eagerly sought patronage of influential urbanites. (Konstantinov and Simic 2001)

From socialist ‘controlled’ to post-socialist ‘liberated’ informal economy

From this perspective, the system’s demise and the changes of 1989 can be seen as a progression from a relatively controlled informal socio-economy to its uncontrolled (‘liberated’) state. ‘Liberation’ is to be seen as a top-down movement in the interests of previously constrained middle-tier political-cum-administrative elites. A categorical difference can thus be seen between former and post-`89 management of informality. As it has been shown elsewhere (Konstantinov 2015), the logic of informality, followed by the former order, was driven by a political top-down will for legitimation through ensuring a degree of security and well-being for a broad regime base. Post-`89 (postsocialist) order, most certainly in the
country in focus here (Bulgaria), exhibited cavalier lack of concern for the broad social base, concentrating its efforts in the upper political-administrative-business strata. The result has been impoverishment at the social base and its growing sense of moral lapse as regards the new, allegedly ‘democratic’ order. As an eminent scholar of Eastern Europe concisely summed it up: ‘post-socialism hurts’ (Kideckel 2008:6).

Such a reading of post-Soviet/post-socialist changes has implications for their driving forces. It points to locating them in the upper and middle echelons of previous power, leaving only a marginal role to dissident movements, unless it was for making use of the latter.

A second categorial difference to be noticed is in the fact that the post-’89 ‘liberated informality’ order lost no time at all to cross national borders. This was a truly novel opportunity both as regarded the West, but also the East. It can be only mentioned here that confining informality within the national borders of individual Soviet Bloc countries remains a topic awaiting investigation. It calls for such by presenting another aspect of the relatively controlled state of informality during the previous period.

It can thus be argued that disconnectedness between the ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ regions in the imagined European unity stems from the role informal socio-economy plays in both parts. More specifically, from an institutionally controlled state in the western (‘metropolitan’) parts as different from its ‘liberated’ state in the peripheries.

In the local case, this model is exemplified by parasitism on EU agricultural subsidies, going in their lion’s share to agri-business tycoons, like the local ‘strong man’ Stoevski. His criminal-cum-political connections locals explain (in whisper) by his ability to transfer generously from the first to the second of these key domains. A small-scale local agricultural player confided:

‘You see his fields? Mark my word – come 2020 (when the period of EU development funding expires), all this will be desolate land (pustosh) once again (i.e. as before accession to the Union). His interests will then turn to other available spheres’ (A.A., March 2017).

It is clear, against this background, that no physical linkage, like the one offered by canalization of transecting rivers, nor lip-service to ‘European values’, can offer connectedness in real terms. Its opposite has all the likelihood of being here to stay.

**Connectedness by water**

The role of water as a connecting element has not been always at the low point we see it today. It is the tragedy of the last war and the wish to dissociate from the Nazi period that the
memory of greatest connectivity by inland waterways in recent times – concerning the regions in question – has fallen into conscious oblivion. It is a historical fact, however, that Nazi Germany’s interest in petrol from Romania, and agricultural produce from Romania and Bulgaria, increased transportation turnover between the Lower and the Upper Danube in the pre-WW2 years and during it to levels hard to imagine today. The Bulgarian Prime Minister of the time, Bogdan Filov, notes in his diary after a visit to the port of Vidin (14.10.1941):

‘(In the port) there were spectacular amounts of barrels of apple pulp and crates of grapes. They were being loaded for export on our new and fast ships, which reached Vienna in only 4 days. The citizens of Vidin are very pleased with the export and the upsurge of port activities. There is no unemployment. Wages in the port for the workers have reached 100 levs a day.’ (Filov 1990:406)

Narrowing down this perspective to the now gone vineyards and orchards of my studies, it is to be said that the pre-war and war periods left a record of volumes of commerce and passenger transportation with the Middle and Upper Danube, never to be reached in later times. Describing the port of Labets (today’s Stanevo) – a place very much like Zhelezarovo – the Guidebook of the Directorate of Waterways (Putevoditel) provides the following data for the last pre-war years:

‘After Lom the (Bulgarian) bank continues to be high in the direction of the village of Labets. The village descends from the Roman settlement and fortress Pomodiana. At present7, the village has 1,306 inhabitants and is a small port, mainly exporting grain. The passenger traffic is also lively. Annually, 1,200 passengers alight here, and 1,300 leave.’ (Putevoditel, p. 16)

In the ‘mature socialism’ decades of the ‘70s and ‘80s, when I began my studies of this particular area (Konstantinov 1995), transportation links crossing the Iron Curtain and going to the Upper Danube had, unsurprisingly, thinned out to a minimum. The metropolitan centre had shifted to the East (the Soviet Union) and its influence, according to Cold War divisions, stretched to the Middle Danube, more specifically: the border between Czechoslovakia and Austria. The Lower and Middle Danube belonged thus to a different construction of place out of riverine space: one in which ideology dreamt of a canalization, which will connect the Danube with the Volga. (Janáč 2012: 131-177) Another and realized project – at staggering human price – was the Romanian ‘Danube-Black Sea Canal’. (Van Meurs 2012; Spulber 1954)

7 Regrettably, this highly interesting brochure is not dated. However, judging by various dates and facts mentioned in it, it must have been published in the last pre-war years, most probably in 1938 or the first half of 1939.
From the micro-perspective I use, converging on the port of Lom and the villages around it, this translated into the following picture. Huge Ukrainian push-convoys would unload their cargoes at the Port of Lom. This was building timber, extracted by the Bulgarian-Soviet company “Glavbolgarstroy” in the Komi Republic of the USSR. This part of eastward linkages was mentioned earlier in connection with log hunting. Another principal load was iron-ore and coal from the Ukrainian Donbass Region. This cargo was unloaded onto freight trains and transported to the blast furnaces of the iron and steel producing plant of “Kremikovtsi” on the outskirts of Sofia. Both Glavbolgarstroy and Kremikovtsi are now defunct, together with numerous other ‘offspring of Bulgarian-Soviet friendship’, as the ideological slogans of the time used to call them.

During this time, passenger boats still connected local ports. I was lucky enough to experience the last days of this service. Its past went back to Ottoman times. During the 19th c. and well into the next, travel between Bulgaria and the West, or ‘Europe’, was by stage-coach (later railroad), from Sofia to Lom, and from there on – by boat to Budapest, Bratislava, and Vienna. River-and-sea going passenger boats used also to connect Danube ports with Black Sea ones.8

The last phase of a local passenger service lasted till the end of the Socialist period. A fleet of hydrofoils connected Bulgarian Danube ports – even the smallest of them, like the one not far from Zhelezarovo. People used them like buses. International travel also existed, but mainly for western tourists, paying in hard currency. These tourists were segregated from the ordinary public by being confined to luxury passenger boats. Two of them were Bulgarian, the rest mostly Soviet (i.e. Ukrainian).

Local passenger service illustrates concerns of the former regime of legitimation ‘from below’. This part of vertical connectedness between grassroots base of the social pyramid, and power elites, has been now removed as regards peripheral regions. In particular – like the NW of my case. What has come instead has been a spectacular rise in foreign tourist cruises. This part of the local story deserves a short description.

**Danube tourist cruises** have risen notably in the post-socialist decades, but especially so since about the 2000s. In the words of a researcher of the phenomenon:

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8 A terrorist act on board Austro-Hungarian river- and sea-going ship ‘Vaskapu’ on 2 Sept. 1903, detonating the ship off the Port of Varna, dates back to the time when passenger traffic was busy between river and Black Sea ports all the way to Istanbul. On the ‘Vaskapu’ story see Argus (1903); Blagov (2008). Another reminiscence of these times comes from Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula’. Readers will remember that the ship carrying the infamous Count sailed from London and eventually unloaded at Galats (Galati) on the Danube.
‘Within the global tourism development, the Danube (Pan-European Corridor VII) occupies a leading position within both demand and offer (Dragin et al. 2006), which is confirmed by the data for 2003 when about 392,766 tourists participated in the Danube river cruises (followed by the Nile with 266,978 and Yangtze with 151,459 tourists).’ (Dragin 2009: 58)

This conspicuous development has an interesting look from the perspective of the desolate vineyards and the bank below them. Whole days would pass, sometimes two, without a push-convoy in sight. It would be a rare day, however, if a luxury cruiser did not pass by. This is a great nuisance for those with fishing boats (like myself). The cruisers have very powerful engines, and unless the boat is well anchored at a distance from the bank, or best hauled up on the beach, the waves they raise can bash it to splinters. In the same way, nets can be torn from their anchors and tangled up by the current. One does watch out for those boats.

The flags they wave on their sterns are of many different countries. Some of them are difficult to connect with the Danube: Norwegian, Swiss, French. The passengers on the decks are elderly persons mostly. Evidently, the industry is after pension-money from the affluent West. When the ships pass by my camp, the old-age western pensioners have invariably turned their backs to ‘my’ side of the river. Their binoculars are trained on the distant Carpathian ridge on the Northern horizon. After Belgrade, their next stop is Vidin, and then they would stop only at Rousse – which is still over four hundred kilometres downriver from my camp.

The western luxury boats churning the river as they pass by and their passengers looking the other way, I find deeply symbolic. It is a visual metaphor of disconnectedness itself. Compared to the previous order, there is not a single point of contact in the present scheme of things, save for bashing up fishing boats and tearing up nets. Formerly, revenue from fruit exported to West Germany came back in some part to the coffers of APK “Zhelezarovo”, helping to keep it and the surrounding villages going. The luxury boat industry may be seen as contributing only in going into EU agricultural subsidies by way of global economic networks. Proceeds from these, in their turn, may end up with ‘liberated’ users, like the local agri-millionaire. The villages remain entirely cut-off from this postsocialist subsidy feast, for which they contribute as taxpayers. In case they would develop the unlikely wish that they want to go by boat from one end of the Bulgarian stretch of the river to the other, i.e. from Vidin to Rousse or back, they cannot do so. The tourist cruisers are only for tourists. One could compare the system with the Norwegian Hurtigruten Line. It is serviced by huge 7-deck tourist cruisers, but is obliged to stop at every fjord village on the
way from Bergen to Kirkenes. Ordinary people can therefore use the service. Although economically unsound, the ideology behind it is one of connectedness.

Workers for the latifundian-like holding are mostly bussed in and out from elsewhere. Commenting on it, the local shop-keeper said: ‘They (the farm workers) don’t even come here to buy a pack of cigarettes. We never see them.’ It would be only for non-mechanised jobs – like cattle-herding – that local Roma may get hired by the agro-millionaires, but as they complain – only for very low wages.

**TID and Ecological Connectedness**

River tourism calls for a special mention to be made of an international boating regatta, known as *Tours International du Danube* (TID). It is a phenomenon, which is in need of a scholarly discussion in its own right. Only a few introductory words will be said here.

TID is phenomenal because it was born during the Cold War and has survived to this day. Starting in Ingolstadt in Germany, the boaters paddled down the river from Capitalist West Germany and Austria, through Socialist Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and all the way down to Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Romania. This opens up the topic of chinks through the Iron Curtain – like East and West German families reuniting in the socialist resorts at Lake Balaton in Hungary, the Golden Sands and Sunny Beach in Bulgaria, or Eforia in Romania. In TID, the Cold War adversaries paddled and camped together down the Danube, truly in the spirit of European connectedness, despite ideological obstacles and standard-of-life asymmetries. These latter, incidentally, sustained an informal economy in this particular sector too. Many a Western boater would sell all their equipment to hungrily eyeing it Socialist paddling brethren. With the proceeds and some easy topping up by own funds they would then extend their holiday with a couple of additional weeks at the nearest and fabulously cheap Bulgarian or Romanian Black Sea resort. I myself bought my first collapsible canoe that way. The Ferrari of this type of boats was the West German ‘Klepper’, but I was happy to get a much cheaper East German ‘Puch’. It is well and alive still, forty years hence.

These are the less seen details surrounding all great ideas. The idea of waterway connectedness was certainly there, despite the contrasts between flashy ‘western’ and shabby ‘eastern’ boats and equipment. This leads to a conclusion, to be reiterated at the end, that connectedness is first and foremost a spiritual movement. A river may resemble such a movement, but, in its absence, it is indifferent.
Post-socialism

At the vineyards for ‘personal use’ of Zhelezarovo, two things happened simultaneously after the changes of ’89. One was the rapid turning of both the vineyards and the co-operative orchards into wilderness – or ‘jungle’ (*dzhungla*), as local people began to call it. The other was a boom in the population of jackals and birds-of-prey, mostly hawks.

There was a natural connection between these two events. Upon asking villagers why they had abandoned their vineyards, cultivated with such care, and yielding not a little – wine, brandy, grapes, fruit, vegetables – they put the blame on marauding Roma from nearby villages. ‘What sense does it make for me to hoe the ground half a year, when the Gypsies would come and take it all?’, was the typical answer from old-time friends.

The jackals and hawks were explained with the denseness of the growth of shrubs, turning the place into a ‘jungle’. ‘It is a jungle out there’, the same friends would say, ‘you cannot pass through it. There are packs of jackals, eagles above. This is what happened thanks to your democracy from Sofia’.

Democracy had become dirty word around the villages, where nostalgia for the old times was very strong and growing stronger as time went by. There were signs of devastation everywhere. The irrigation system built at great expense during socialist times was in ruins, the fields were overgrown with weeds, the orchards and vineyards were a ‘jungle’. Looking for the wells proved impossible for me, as the wires on which the vines had once clung, were overgrown with bushes and lianas. This turned the place into invisible lines of fences. The vineyards had become an impenetrable mass through which one had to cut a path through with wire-shears. In places, trees had grown in between the once neat rows. Still, I pushed forward until I heard the warning grunt of a wild pig. In former times, boars would stampede away, but it was their land now. I had to turn back.

Asking Roma friends about what was going on, they would put the blame on *gadzhe* – the non-Roma, i.e. Bulgarians. ‘The gadzhe began robbing each other’s vineyards and then put the blame on us. Why should I take from them? I buy *mastika* (mastic brandy) from the shop.’

Recriminations went back and forth, with tension rising to a pitch at times. The mostly elderly villagers were no match for the youthful Roma however. What helped matters in a way, was that come 2011 and EU entry, both Bulgarians and Roma took every opportunity to find employment abroad. That is, those who felt fit enough. The stubbornly remaining began to depend on the labour migrants’ remittances and wait all year for them to visit during the summer.
With EU entry, another development took place – the sudden emergence and rapid flourishing of the affairs of above mentioned agro-millionaire Stoevski. The former APK fields, left fallow for a decade, acquired prime cultivated look, down to neat signs, announcing the crop at the side of each huge block.

By 2015 another change occurred down at the devastated orchards. The jungle was razed down to brown earth by hundreds of head of cows. On the side of the dirt road, leading down to the orchards, there grew a make-shift Roma camp: reed-roofs on poles, covered with polythene. ‘We are cow-herds now’, Assen (otherwise: Ahmed)\(^9\), the head of family, explained, ‘all of us, except those who went to Spain’. ‘Whose are these cows?’, I asked. ‘Whose are they – the boss’s (na shefa). Whose can they be?’. It transpired eventually, that the ‘boss’, i.e. Stoevski, had decided to experiment in cow ranching – a herd of some seven hundred head. ‘They are very wild’, Assen-Ahmed explained, ‘you can’t go near them. Wild animals! We only put bales of straw and some corn – over there – for them to come back in the evening. Keep an eye on them in the fields also – the jackals take new-born calves.’ ‘How much does he pay you?’ ‘Pay?’, he laughed. ‘Pay. There is something for bread and mastika – that’s all. But there is nothing else around. It is still something. Good thing both my sons work in Spain.’\(^10\)

Down by the river there were other changes. One was that treasure-hunters could be seen passing by with their detectors in broad daylight. Among numerous other visual expressions, this was certainly illustrating the passage from ‘controlled’ to ‘liberated’ informality at the bottom rung of the scale. Not a day would pass when someone did not walk by my tent on the beach, gently waving the dish of a metal detector above the pebbles. The peeping sound of the detector, rising to a pitch when it hit metal, mixed with the twittering of birds.

Kamen would often stop by for a chat and a cup of coffee. He came from a Roma village further down the river. ‘This is self-made (samodelka)’, he said, pointing at his metal detector, whose handle was converted from the metal tube of a broom. ‘There are guys coming here with detectors for thousands. But I am satisfied with this one: for me, that’s enough. There are no jobs around, but we get by. The whole village is doing nothing but metal-detecting.’

\(^9\) So-called ‘Turkish Gypsies’ in Bulgaria, i.e. of the largest group in the country, whose mother tongue is Turkish, underwent compulsory renaming from Turkic-Arabic to Bulgarian names during in 1950s-’80s. In communication with non-Roma, they would prefer, on the whole, to use Bulgarian names. (Cf. Konstantinov and Alhaug 1995).

\(^10\) Upon closer questioning, it came out that the cow-herds were paid BGN 400 a month, i.e. EUR 200.
Kamen was a Roman coins man. On good days, he would make as much as 200 levs (100 euro), but mostly less, oftentimes - nothing. Still – enough to get by, he said.

Where was he selling the coins? ‘At first we knew nothing. We are simple people, wild people (*divi hora*). So, he comes along (the coin trader), and says: this one 5 lev, that one 10 lev. What could we do – we gave him (the coins). But, by and by, we got wiser. If you find a Nero (*neron*) in good condition, it can buy you a car, two cars, three cars!’

The day before he had found a coin from the reign of Emperor Vespasian. ‘Two hundred levs! That made my wage (*izkarakh nadnitsata*). And not that I was trying very hard – not at all. I had given it up for the day and was on my way home. Just waving the stick around – like this. And then – dinnnn! Sonofabitch! Right over there.’

Who was the man buying the coins? ‘Now we have catalogues. You can find every coin in the catalogue and its price. He can’t fool us – we have computers, I bought my youngest son a computer, he knows all the tricks. The man comes round once a week. We show him the coins, he knows we know the price from the computer. So now, he gives more.’ It gradually came out, through this talk that the man came from Vidin, but the coins themselves ended up in Vienna.

Kamen’s dream was to find a Roman military diploma. They were very rare and fetched ‘enormous prices’. ‘If I get one, I’ll repair the house and instantly get pensioned off’, Kamen declared. ‘Or a helmet, something like that. Much better than coins’.

Another hunter with a low opinion of coins was a rather secretive boy in his teens. He would occasionally pass by on a bicycle, peering at the pebbles on the beach. One day he stopped and asked for a drink of water. He would not say where he came from, nor tell me his name. But he told me what he was looking for: flint bits (*kremutsi*). He showed me some he had found that day. ‘Arrow-heads’, he said, ‘also a weight for a fishing net, could be for a loom also.’ It was a round stone ball, the size of a small marble, with a hole drilled through it.

It appeared there was a market for pre-historic artefacts also. This took me back to Neolithic times and the agricultural diaspora. Connectedness, in the present, again suggested smuggling networks to Western Europe. ‘It is much more interesting than coins,’ the boy said, ‘and you do not need anything but your eyes.’

The secretive flint hunter did not believe in investing in equipment, or, very likely, could not afford to. However, others did it in a big way. When visiting the campsite area on 2 May 2017, preparatory to the new field-season, there were several rows of trenches dug along

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11 On Roman veterans’ military diplomas see Derks and Roymans (2006).
the first elevation behind the camp. By the look of it, the work had been done in late autumn or very early spring. The trenches must have been dug with a mini-excavator whose shovel was about half-a-metre wide. The earth thrown out alongside did not show marks of small-object searching – like for coins. It was probable that the search had been for foundations of buildings or other large structures.

Not far from the trenches, a biggish hole was dug, possibly with a bigger machine and much wider shovel. Depth was 1.5 m at the front, 1 m at the back where the excavator must have stood, and 3.5 m wide. That hole I had seen already in the summer of 2016. It may have been dug in the spring of that year when the top loess layer was still soft. Using excavators for treasure hunting and not bothering to cover up trenches, I see as another forcible sign of ‘liberated informality’ in the local context.

**Migrant trafficking**

With the migrant wave from the war-torn Middle East of the last two years, a new illegal industry was born – migrant trafficking. Media reports claim that returns are considerable. Sums around a thousand euro a person are mentioned. This for taking a migrant across the country on a south-east – north-west route, i.e. from Turkey or Greece to Serbia or Romania. The migrants would continue from thence on their quest for reaching the metropolitan West, i.e. Germany.

Two of the more spectacular accidents on the migrants’ route brought attention to the region of my study. In the first one of them, seventy-one migrants were found dead by Austrian police in August 2015. (Penchev 2015) Court-proceedings led to an organized group in one of the Roma quarters of Lom. Details about the main persons accused, indicate lively family and kin links between Lom and towns in Germany, Italy and elsewhere in Europe. In some cases, migrant trafficking had become the latest addition in a portfolio of car-thefts, robberies, prostitution, and drug trafficking. (Tsvetkova 2015)

The second incident occurred not very far from my camp on the night of 8 September, 2016. In it, two boats carrying Iraqi migrants overturned before reaching the Romanian bank of the river. Two young men and four children drowned. (Tsvetkova 2016; Vesti.bg 2016) According to these reports, the migrants – ten in all – had paid up to 10,000 USD per person for getting across Bulgaria to Romania. The sum looks inflated, but in any case, it suggests the size of the new industry, and its significance for the poverty-stricken NW. Reports describe, at the same time, how proceeds from the business go for real estate buying on a
grand scale and for keeping up sybaritic life styles for the bigger players in the Roma quarters of Lom. (Standart 2015)

From personal experience I can say that upon many a night push-convoys would slow down on their way upriver, and boats can be seen nudging their sides. What can be going on there, I could not say, nor going to see would be a choice I would take.

**Rays of hope**
If one stays by the river long enough, one can see signs of connectedness with upriver lands – and, hearteningly, not such that are related to informal or criminal activities. One such is the TID regatta, already mentioned, as also other boaters, paddling downriver from as far upriver as Germany. These are people of various European countries, Bulgari strongly represented among them, for whom the river unites through concerns of its ecological well-being. A spectacular example was an American woman, Mimi Hughes, a long-distance swimmer, who swam by the camp one summer day of 2005, accompanied by her daughter on a canoe. In an interview she gave, while stopping for a day in Lom, she shared that the river was much cleaner that the one another American adventurer, Rod Heikell, described fifteen years before (Tsenkova 2016:17).

Another sign came in the form of a bottle floating down the river. There was a letter inside. Its contents I have translated and quote in full:

‘22 March – World Water Day
We, the students of 7 A Form, members of the Eco Club at ‘Otets Paisiy’ Primary School – City of Vidin, mark this day not because there is too much water on the planet, but because it needs more help and more frequently. Pure water has been diminishing alarmingly during the last decade, and the time will be not far off when it shall be dearer than gold. We do not want that to happen and are ready to do whatever we could so that the priceless life-giving liquid shall be saved for the future generations. We are ready to join forces with all who think like us and we believe that reason shall prevail!

Bulgaria, City of Vidin 3700
53 Ekozarch Yosif I Street, ‘Otets Paisiy’ Primary School ‘ (letter in a bottle, found 1.09.2016, Km 727)

These examples present another side of life by the river – one of enjoyment and concerns for the river – and water in general – as an all-uniting medium.

**Conclusions**
It is against the background of such diverse realities that the story of the lower parts of the Rhein-Main-Danube canal has been offered to be read here in terms of connectedness/disconnectedness.
The tension, of which Gershenkron once spoke, has not produced the hoped for institutions in the region of my concern. According to current estimates, ‘inefficient institutions and corruption rank the country in 29th place among 35 European states’ (Kisyova 2017).

Another conclusion, suggested earlier on, is that with the dismantling of State Socialism and its relative control of an informal socio-economy, the latter has entered a phase of liberation. This is evident from the spread of informal to outright criminal practices, which make use of the idea of a unity only by virtue of the openings through institutional barriers. This new order is sustained by metropolitan conviction that it is better to trade off liberated informality for stability, as the latter sustains wholeness. (In another – Donald Trump’s version: ‘We seek partners, not perfection’). A more specific and recent motif in this practice of legitimizing informality in the periphery has been by stressing its role as a boundary for stopping migrant incursions.

The river itself, on both sides of this shaky equation, has proved to be of only minor significance. On the one hand, liberated informality uses river waterways only marginally. On the other, it has come to be, as suggested above, that only grassroots actors’ idealism, resting on an ethics of the wholeness of the non-manmade part of our world sees the river as a unifying medium. With these thoughts in mind, I conclude that disconnectedness, insofar that natural physical features of the earth are concerned, is to be seen as the inevitable product of political over broadly environmental concerns.

As regards the more concrete issue with which I began – the strange case of poverty in one of Europe’s most fertile regions, known as such since prehistoric times. My data suggests that things could improve only in case there is an institutional reversal from liberated to relatively controlled informality. Of a fully controlled one, it may be unrealistic to think at this stage, if ever. This is because of what was said above: current metropolitan political thinking is in favour of sustaining an imagined unity. In metropolitan areas, liberated informality is contained – to an extent – by available institutions. In the peripheral areas, the issue of stability and its shielding-the-metropia function is seen to override other considerations. Despite abundant proclamations to the contrary, the inevitable conclusion is that cohesion does not look like a priority from a top-down metropolitan perspective. So far, at least, it is such only from a bottom-up one.

Sofia, 26 January 2018
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